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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash
level. 4
The Leaders and the Led

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level.4 - The Leaders and the Led

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“Kuzaku-kun.”
Merry bowed her head.
“Let me apologize one more time. I’m sorry.
And thank you.”

“I should have stepped in sooner. To tell you the truth, I was watching. When you two left the bar. Something struck me as wrong, so I followed you. Then, well, you know what happened.”

It was... not Lightning. The chant was similar, but it was a different spell.
A flash of light. Rumbling. Lightning fell. No, a bundle of lightning might have been a better way to describe it.

"Erm... By your place, you mean..."
"The Day Breakers."
"Will you come join my place?" Soma asked.
"...Come again?"
This is a fork in the road, Haruhiro thought.
It's a turning point in our lives.

Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash — "The Story So Far"

"Awaken."
On hearing that word,
Haruhiro awakens to find himself in the unfamiliar world of Grimgar.
In order to survive, Haruhiro and the others are forced to live as volunteer soldiers.
Despite losing Manato, the central figure of their party,
Haruhiro and the others add a new priest,
Merry, to their group, and succeed in avenging him.

After challenging themselves by going to the Cyrene Mines,
where they defeat Death Spots, an offer comes up for Team Haruhiro to participate
in an attack on Deadhead Watching Keep, curretly occupied by orcs.
Haruhiro is hesitant at first, but when he learns that a new volunteer soldier
who seems oddly familiar to him, Choco, will be taking part in the operation,
that gives him the impetus to decide he will participate.

The battle for the keep is incredibly violent.
Volunteer soldiers fall one after another, Choco among them.
When the hard battle comes to an end,
Haruhiro and the others have worked with Renji and his team to fell the orcish leader.
However, before they can savor the sweet taste of victory,
Moguzo, who was standing in a daze, collapses.

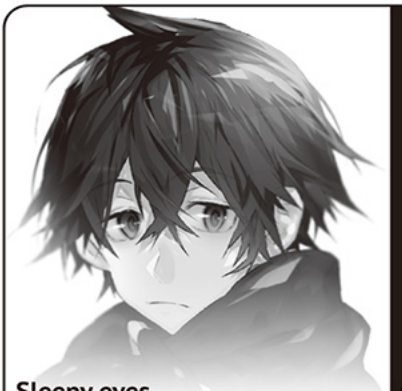
Even so, the adventure continues.

Characters

YUME

Airheaded soothing-type.
Speaks an iffy sort of Kansai dialect?

Class — Hunter



HARUHIRO

Sleepy eyes.
Passive-type. Provisional leader.

Class — Thief

SHIHORU

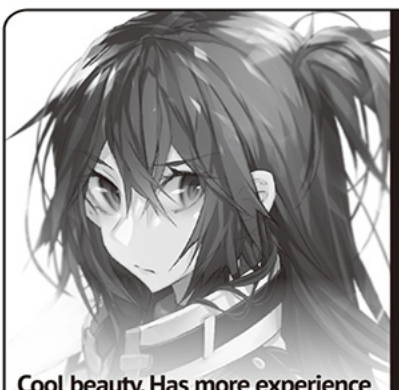
Shy and withdrawn.
Hard worker with little presence.

Class — Mage

RANTA

Selfish, flaky joker.
#1 most unpopular.

Class — Dread Knight



MERRY

Cool beauty. Has more experience as a volunteer soldier and is a little more of an adult.

Class — Priest

MOGUZO

Bear-type. A somewhat slow, but reliable, bear.

Class — Warrior

Other Characters

Team Renji

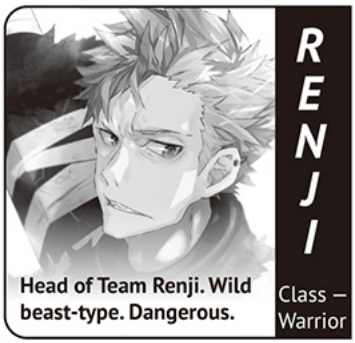
Ron — Class: Paladin — The Team's No. 2.
Sassa — Class: Thief — Flashy woman. Probably an M.
Adachi — Class: Mage — Wears glasses.
Chibi — Class: Priest — Mascot.

Day Breakers

Kemuri - Class: Paladin - Dreadlocks.
Pingo - Class: Necromancer - Age unknown.
Shima - Class: Shaman - Healer and big sister.
Lilia - Class: Sword Dancer - Tsundere elf.

Other

Kajiko - Class: Warrior - Terrifying beauty.
Shinohara - Class: Warrior - Clan leader.
Kuzaku - Class: Paladin - New guy.



It looked like the orc attendants had all been killed. Shihoru was crying tears of relief and Yume was hugging her, saying, “There, there. You did great. Just great,” as she patted her on the head.

“Can you get up?” Merry asked.

Yeah, no, I can’t. Haruhiro was about to tell that lie, because it seemed like Merry would treat him gently if he did. But he didn’t.

“I can manage, yeah,” Haruhiro said, getting up. “Though, really, before you help me...”

Why’s he just standing there? Haruhiro wondered.

Everyone was dancing, chatting, having their priest treat them, or doing something, but Moguzo was just standing there.

There’s something weird about it, Haruhiro thought.

Moguzo wasn’t holding his sword. His arms were slumped at his sides.

It’s incredible that he’s standing at all, though, Haruhiro thought. *I’m amazed he can stand. That he managed to stay on his feet. Especially in that state. Like, his helmet, it’s not just crushed, it’s not even fully on. There’s blood dripping off him here and there, too.*

Suddenly, Moguzo slowly fell over. Like when something big and heavy suddenly loses its support and collapses. That was the sort of fall it was.

Merry gulped.

“...Moguzo?” When Haruhiro called his name, Moguzo slowly got to his feet. “Wh-What was that for?”

Haruhiro calmed himself, letting out a sigh. *That surprised me. For a moment there, I was really panicking. I thought something happened that we can never let happen. There’s no way it would*

have, though.

"Don't scare me like that, Moguzo," he said.

"Sorry, sorry." Moguzo let out an embarrassed laugh and scratched the back of his head.

Still, he sure is bleeding a lot, Haruhiro thought. *With all that blood, it's impossible to tell what kind of face he's making. But, well, it looks like he's fine somehow.*

"Thank goodness..." Haruhiro murmured, closing his eyes.

He covered his face with his hands. *I think I'm gonna cry.*

"Really, thank goodness..."

Seriously, I don't know what I would have done. If that ever happened, we'd be screwed. So screwed.

It'll never happen, though.

Like, no way. It couldn't. Not a chance.

"Thank goodness..."

I think I'm gonna cry. Wait, no, I already am. My hands are wet. The hands covering my face. That's just how relieved I am. Seriously, what a relief. Thank goodness. Just thank goodness. Honestly—Honestly, I thought he was a goner. I think I vaguely remember having a dream like that. Though, I don't know when I'd have had time for a dream like that. I wonder. Was it something like a prophetic dream? Like, maybe I had a dream like that last night? A dream where he wasn't okay? That's so weird. Having a dream like that. It's weird. Anyway, thank goodness. Moguzo's covered in blood, but, still, thank goodness. If nothing else, I'm glad he's all right.

"Thank goodness..."

Haruhiro heard a voice. His own voice. He moved his hands.

Dark. It's pitch dark. A room. It's our room in the volunteer soldier lodging house. Was I sleeping? I was asleep. That means...

He didn't want to think it. But... he wanted to check, had to check, so he sat up.

There were two bunk beds in this room. Ranta used the upper bunk of the other bed.

Ranta's there. He's snoring. And on the lower bunk—He's not there. No one is. It's empty.

He's not there.

Moguzo's not there.

He isn't anywhere anymore.

1. The Unbearable Heaviness of Reality

It's terrible when a person dies.

In the end, Haruhiro had probably never imagined that he would be forced to experience that again.

Of course, he had thought it was a possibility. He had probably thought about it more seriously than any of his comrades, and he had feared it from the bottom of his heart.

But the death, the loss, that Haruhiro had expected wasn't like the reality.

This was very different from what happened with Manato. That time, it had come without them really understanding what was happening, and by the time they had noticed, all that was left was pain.

They had carried the body back to Alterna, had the body burned at the crematorium, then buried his ashes on the hill where the tower with no entrance stood. Those memories hadn't blurred in the least, but it all went by strangely quickly. That was probably because Renji and the others had helped them out, so things had moved along without any hitches.

However, from there on, it was terrible.

Haruhiro's comrade, his friend, was dead. They had burned him,

reducing him to ash and bone, and now he rested eternally on that hill where no one would disturb him. Moguzo was lost to Haruhiro and his friends now.

Though Moguzo was gone, there were still traces left behind that showed he had once existed.

His equipment, for instance.

There was his heavily dented plate armor and his crushed helmet, along with The Chopper, that sword they had taken off Death Spots. They couldn't burn those things with him. Even if they had wanted to, they were made of metal, so it was physically impossible.

Even so, they couldn't just throw them out, either. But if they were going to keep them, they didn't have the space.

"...For now, we could put them on deposit... maybe," Shihoru said.

No one objected to Shihoru's proposal. However, when they went to the Yorozu Deposit Company, they discovered a serious problem.

"Yes, it is possible for you to deposit items other than money with our company," said the fourth Yorozu, a young girl wearing a gaudy red and white outfit accented with gold along with a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. She tapped her gold pipe on the counter. "When you deposit money, the deposit fee is 1/100th of the amount deposited. When you deposit an item, it is 1/50th of the appraised value. But even without an appraisal, I can tell you that that helmet and armor are worthless."

"Huh...? Why?" Haruhiro asked.

"Do you need it explained to you, insolent one?"

Ever since the first day they'd met, Yorozu had kept calling Haruhiro "insolent one." It was awful.

"That helmet and armor are useless," she said. "Even if you were to

spend the money to repair them, I question whether they could ever be useful again. Anyway, I suggest you go to a blacksmith and have them take that scrap metal off your hands."

"Hey, you! Watch your tongue...!" Ranta screamed.

Haruhiro did at least hold Ranta back from jumping over the counter, but he felt the same as Ranta did.

Scrap metal! What're you calling scrap metal? That's my comrade's armor, I'll have you know! It's a memento. You can't call it scrap metal. You don't know a damn thing, so don't give me that crap!

However, that wasn't quite true.

Yorozu narrowed her eyes, then shrugged her delicate shoulders. "They are mementos of your comrade, correct? Information of all sorts tends to find its way to the Yorozu, you see. I am aware of your situation, but at this company there are some rules that even the fourth Yorozu cannot bend. No matter what the reason, we cannot give you special treatment. You cannot deposit items that are of no value with our company. Our warehouse space is finite, after all. If those items are so precious that you cannot bear to dispose of them, then you should take care of them yourselves."

There was nothing Haruhiro could say back to that. If the items were so important to them, they could take care of them themselves. No, not just could—*should*. Yorozu was absolutely right, and it would have been wrong to fault her for it.

"...Well, how about the sword...?" asked Shihoru.

Yorozu nodded. "That, you can deposit with us, of course. However, it once belonged to *the* Death Spots, did it not? It will not be cheap."

When they had one of the specialist clerks appraise it, it actually did come out to an incredible price. It was 25 gold. The deposit fee would be 1/50th of that, so 50 silver. While it wasn't beyond their means, it

was enough to give them pause.

"Yume's thinkin' maybe we don't need to decide right now..." said Yume.

Haruhiro agreed. Practically speaking, putting it off still left them with the problem of what to do with the items. It felt like, in the end, they were going to have no choice but to deposit it anyway. Still, they didn't need to decide immediately. They could do it tomorrow, the day after, or even later. They had other things that they would need to do.

Yorozu said, "While you're here, out of concern, let me ask you, what do you wish to do with the deceased's assets?"

"Assets?" Haruhiro asked.

"The deceased had money on deposit with our company. Only he himself would normally be able to withdraw it, but in the event of death, it is possible for someone else to do so by going through the proper procedures."

"Huh... Really?" Haruhiro asked.

"Specifically, you would have to go through the Volunteer Soldier Corps office to acquire a death certificate and a certificate granting you power of attorney, both issued by the margrave," she said. "On confirmation of those documents, our company will return the deceased's assets to his legal representative."

"The office... Certificates..."

"For your information, at present, we are unable to disclose any further details regarding the deceased's assets," Yorozu informed them.

How much did Moguzo have saved up? Haruhiro wondered. *He bought armor whenever he had the money to, and his meals cost a lot, so he can't have had much in savings. Still, I feel like it'd be sloppy to just leave it. When we lost Manato, we didn't know left*

from right, so we couldn't handle it properly. This time, I want to do things right. I have to.

Was Haruhiro the only one thinking that?

The day after they went to the Yorozu Deposit Company, Haruhiro visited the Volunteer Soldier Corps office on his own. Ranta wouldn't get out of bed, and Haruhiro couldn't get a clear response when he tried to call Yume and Shihoru. As for Merry, she wasn't even in the same building. Haruhiro had had no choice but to come alone.

When he went to talk to Britney, a.k.a. Bri-chan, about the paperwork, Britney called out to him first.

"Oh, it's you! Fabulous timing. Let's talk bounty money. Huh, what's that, you say? You never went to the meeting to decide how it would be divided, you say? I hear that caused some trouble for them. Renji and Kajiko, that is. Well, I'm sure you were too busy worrying about other things to attend. Still, it's times like that when you need to get in there and stake your claim, otherwise you'll lose out, you know?"

"...Bounty money," Haruhiro muttered. "—Wait. Huh...?"

They had already received the payment for the order when they had returned to Alterna after the operation was complete. The rest of the balance they were owed came to 80 silver each, paid in the form of military scrip: thin copper chits issued by the Frontier Army.

"Ah," Haruhiro realized. "Do you mean for the keeper, Zoran Zesh, and the sorcerer, Abael...?"

"Yes, for them." Bri-chan licked his black lips and closed one eye.

Oh, please, stop, thought Haruhiro. *Don't screw around with me now.*

"Zoran Zesh was 100 gold, Abael was 50. That's 150 gold total," Bri-chan said. "The way I heard it, you and your party took out Abael

almost entirely on your own."

"Ah... Well, yeah... I guess. Now that you mention it, maybe we kind of did."

"That said, in cases like that, things are generally split evenly," said Bri-chan. "There'd be squabbling otherwise."

"Well... you could be right about that. I wouldn't know."

"What's the matter with you?" Bri-chan demanded. "You really distinguished yourselves there. Aren't you happy?"

"Happy...?" Haruhiro almost burst out laughing. Not because he thought it was funny, of course. No, that wasn't it. How would he put it...

All he could do was laugh? No, that wasn't it, either. Like, "Don't you get it? Are you stupid?" Like, "I'm gonna send you flying."

Haruhiro looked downwards, clenching his hands into fists. "...No, I don't think I'm happy."

"I can see that." Bri-chan sighed.

Haruhiro was still looking down, so he couldn't see the expression on Bri-chan's face. He didn't really want to see it, either.

"Regardless, you have a right to a share of the reward money, and I'm holding onto your share. According to Kajiko, Renji basically steamrolled her, but you get 60 gold."

"Sixty?!" Haruhiro gasped.

He couldn't help but be shocked by that number. He felt like he'd suddenly woken up from a dream.

Oh, if only it had all been a nightmare. How glad he would have been.

“Sixty gold—you mean, like, 60 gold coins…?” he stumbled.

“That’s right,” said Bri-chan. “Or, if we convert it to silver coins, 6,000. Divide it by six—no, five—and you each get 12 gold.”

“Twelve…” Haruhiro murmured.

It touched a nerve the way Bri-chan had corrected himself from six to five, but it was such a large amount of money that it still hadn’t sunk in that it was real just yet.

But I’m not happy, Haruhiro thought. *Not happy at all.*

“…We’ll take what we can get, but…”

“*But?*” Bri-chan demanded.

“No… We’ll take it. Gratefully. It’s better to have money than not to, after all. Having it’s not going to hurt us. Ah, but before that—”

“A death certificate and power of attorney, right?” asked Bri-chan.

“Yeah.”

“It’ll take a while.”

“It will?” Haruhiro asked.

“It has to go through the bureaucrats, after all. Be prepared for it to take ten days. I’d guess around seven, maybe. They almost never issue them within six days. What? You look like you just want to get this over and done with.”

“…Honestly, I may feel that way a bit, yeah,” said Haruhiro.

“It’s not going to be that simple. If you were blood relatives, you could go to Tenboro Tower and sign the papers yourself. But volunteer soldiers aren’t family. If he’d been married, it would be a different matter.”

"Married..."

That was another word that just didn't feel real, and Haruhiro couldn't help but think about how Moguzo would never be able to get married.

He never can. Because he died. It feels like a lie. I lifted Moguzo's motionless body with my own hands, carried him all the way to the crematorium, and even saw the bones and ashes that were left afterwards, and I still can't believe it. I don't want to believe.

"He wasn't yet, right?" Bri-chan asked. "Married, that is."

"...Yeah, he wasn't."

"For a volunteer soldier who's single, they're without any relatives, so the Volunteer Soldier Corps office is the one that confirms their identity. I'll need signatures from all of you."

"Huh? Not just from me?" Haruhiro asked.

"Yes. The whole party," said Bri-chan. "And I'll need you all to sign it in front of me. That's the law."

"So, then..." Haruhiro began.

"Come back later."

As he walked away from the office dejectedly, Haruhiro was at a loss for what to do. Ranta, Yume, and Shihoru would be fine. But what about Merry?

Now that I think about it, up until now, we've never really talked about plans, thought Haruhiro. *We just gathered at the north gate every morning, as if that was the natural thing to do. After Moguzo died, did we talk at all about what to do the next day? Wait, no, that's just it. The day it happened, we had to take care of the burial and stuff, so Merry stayed in Yume and Shihoru's room that night. I think it was around noon, the next day. When I saw her at the lodge,*

we got talking about what to do with Moguzo's things, then we went to the Yorozu Deposit Company… and when we split up in the evening, I don't feel like the topic of what to do the next day came up.

I wonder what Merry's doing, he thought. *Yume and Shihoru might know where Merry's renting a room. Guess I'll have to try asking. Actually, it might be better to have Yume and Shihoru go instead of me. At times like this, it might be better if they were all girls. Either way, I need to find a way to get in touch and meet up with her.*

Haruhiro was holding onto a chit for 60 gold. He needed to split it between five people.

—Five, huh. Five people. One short. Split it five ways…? I can't split a chit. I've got to exchange it for money first. If I recall, I should be able to trade it in at the Yorozu Deposit Company. I wish we'd gone to the office before we went to Yorozu's. Still, we only found out about the procedure we need to go through from Yorozu, so I guess it wouldn't have worked.

"Ahhh…"

As Haruhiro dragged his feet down the road back to the lodging house, he started to feel sick of everything.

"What a pain…"

I want to stop and stand still. I want to crouch down and clutch my head. I want to curl into a ball and stay like that forever.

Suddenly, he remembered Choco. He'd totally forgotten. Haruhiro was appalled with himself.

I'm seriously terrible. So terrible, all I can really do is laugh. Choco died, didn't she? Choco's party, too. They were probably wiped out. I wonder what happened to Choco. Did someone give her a proper burial? The plan was driven by the Frontier Army to begin with. I doubt they'd leave bodies lying around after the battle.

Burial.

Burial, huh.

We burn them, reduce them to bones and ash, then bury them up on that hill, but what good does it do? Nothing really comes of it. It's just that, if we don't cremate them, No-Life King's curse will turn them into zombies. It wouldn't sit right with me to let Choco come back as a zombie. I don't want that. Absolutely not.

For those who've died, they aren't able to do anything about the bodies they leave behind. It falls to the living to do something about it for them.

Did we manage to handle things right? Are we handling things right? What do you think, Moguzo? Isn't there more we could be doing? Like, some way you'd wanted us to do things? Or were there things you wouldn't have wanted us to do? We're not doing anything wrong, are we?

I can ask, but he won't answer. Moguzo's gone. Choco's gone, too. They're dead.

It doesn't feel real, but they're dead.

That's no lie.

It's the truth.

"We never should have gone..." he murmured.

The order. We never should have accepted it. Neither should Choco and her party. It was too much for us.

"Who was it who brought up the idea...?" he asked himself.

It was Ranta. Damn him.

"...But I was the one who made the decision."

If Haruhiro hadn't voted in favor, they might not have accepted the order. No, there was no "might" about it. They probably wouldn't have.

If he hadn't talked with Choco about how her party was going to accept the order, Haruhiro probably wouldn't have convinced himself to do so. Back then, he should have done whatever it took to stop Choco. He should have told her that it was dangerous. It was reckless. That she couldn't go.

If her party hadn't been willing to change their minds, she could have left them. He should have persuaded her to. Haruhiro should have voted against. No matter how much of a fuss Ranta would have kicked up about it. They couldn't handle what they couldn't handle. It was too dangerous. The risk was too great.

But, at the time, Haruhiro had thought the risk wasn't that high, so he'd voted in favor.

I know, he thought bitterly. *Hindsight is always 20/20. Once something like this happens, it's natural to think that everything I did was a mistake. I want to blame someone, even if it's myself. Even though that's pointless.*

No matter what I do, Moguzo's not coming back.

Haruhiro looked up to the sky.

What time is it now? Around three o'clock in the afternoon. It's awfully sunny. I dunno what to say. It's a sunny day, Moguzo.

"I just have to keep looking forward, don't I?" he asked himself. "There's nothing else I can do..."

The sky's so beautiful, it almost seems like a joke.

Haruhiro covered half his face with his right hand. It stung his eyes.

2. Feelin' Funya-funya

Yume was feeling real funya-funya.

What was funya-funya?

Yume didn't really know that herself, but she was feeling funya-funya, so funya-funya was all she could call it.

Because she was feeling funya-funya, she didn't even want to get up. That was why Yume was lyin' face down in the bottom bunk of the bed in her room at the volunteer soldier lodging house.

Once in a while, she'd roll over. But because she was feeling funya-funya, even turnin' over was a chore.

In fact, for a long while now, she'd needed to pee and had been holding it in. She knew she should go to the bathroom. Actually, she had to. That was something she knew for sure, but because she was feeling funya-funya, she couldn't motivate herself to go.

"Yume," Shihoru called out to her.

Yume wanted to respond. But she was feeling funya-funya, so even raisin' her voice took a lot of effort.

In the end, she just went, "...Mmm?"

"...Are you hungry?" Shihoru asked.

"Nnnn..."

Yume wonders about that, she thought. *Yume doesn't think it's that she's not hungry at all. If Yume was gonna eat, she could probably eat a whole lot, y'know? She just doesn't really want to eat. Well, if Yume doesn't eat, Yume's fine with not eatin', I guess.*

"...Nnnn," she said.

"You have to eat," Shihoru protested. "Not eating's bad for your health, I think..."

"Nnnn..."

"Yume?"

"Mmm?"

"Are you listening?"

"Mmm..."

This's no good, Yume though to herself while feeling funya-funya. *Yume needs to give her a proper response. Yume knows that, but she just can't do it.*

Yume's not doin' this to mess with her. Yume just doesn't have the energy. It's not just her body, y'know. Yume's feelings are all funya-funya, too.

"...Give me a break," Shihoru muttered, in a real tiny voice. It was a real tiny voice, so it was hard to be sure if she'd meant for Yume to hear it or not.

Either way, Shihoru was definitely irritated. She sounded angry, the way she said it. It was the first time Shihoru had spoken like that. At least, Yume had never heard her do it before.

Yume rolled over to look at Shihoru, who was sitting on the bed next to her. Shihoru was looking downwards, hanging her head.

"...Sorry," Yume said.

Hearing the apology, Shihoru shook her head back and forth. "...No... I should apologize."

"But you've got nothin' to apologize for, Shihoru," Yume said.

"But...."

"Shihoru, you've done nothin' wrong."

"That's not... true."

"You haven't."

"I can't say... I agree."

"Oh, yeah?" Yume asked.

Shihoru hesitated. "...From here on... what are we supposed to do?"

"Hmm..."

Yume tried thinking. But she couldn't think straight. Her thoughts would just suddenly stop.

Still, she kept thinking. Yume was thinking desperately, at least by Yume's standards. She tried to find the words.

"Hey, Shihoru."

"Yeah?"

"Yume, she's not good at handlin' this sort of stuff," said Yume. "What do you call it...? Hard stuff, painful stuff, she really hates it. Everyone does."

"...Yeah."

"Well, listen, this is just an example, but imagine it rained *really* hard."

“Okay,” Shihoru said slowly.

“So, it’s rainin’ real hard, and you can’t walk around outside, so you’ve gotta stay indoors, y’know. Well, the thing about rain is, even if you ask it to stop, it’s not gonna.”

“Yeah,” said Shihoru.

“It’s like, who would you even ask?” asked Yume. “So, at times like this, there’s really no helpin’ it, y’know?”

“There’s no helping it...” Shihoru murmured. “You think so?”

“Hmm, well, you could say we couldn’t help things turnin’ out like this, and now that they have, there’s no helpin’ it. That’s what Yume meant. It all feels like it’s gotta be a lie, though. Yume never thought things’d turn out like this, y’know.”

“Yeah... same here,” Shihoru said sorrowfully.

“Why didn’t Yume think of it?” Yume asked. “It’s not weird at all that it happened, y’know. Yume should’ve known that.”

This wasn’t the first time it’d happened. It was the second.

But, still, she hadn’t even imagined it, that they could lose a comrade.

That Moguzo would die.

“Yume’s so stupid.” Yume lay on her front. Her whole body felt funya-funya, and awfully heavy. “...Yume, she’s too stupid, y’know. Because Yume’s too stupid, that’s probably how things ended up like this.”

Shihoru didn’t say anything.

Yume was gettin’ kind of tired. But she was sure she wouldn’t be able to fall asleep. Yume tried lyin’ on her back. Her body felt even more funya-funya than before, and heavy.

She didn’t want to move. She didn’t think she’d be able to move for a while.

3. Unlimited

“Hey, Pops! Add another order of soruzo!” Ranta shouted, spraying noodles and broth from his mouth as he did. He raised the index finger on his left hand, too.

In the village of stalls next to the craftsmen’s town in the southern district, there was a stall that was the only place in Alterna where he could get a noodle dish called soruzo.

Soruzo was a dish of meat thrown into a salty broth with yellow noodles that were made by kneading wheat flower and then cutting it thinly. If someone were to ask him if it was delicious, he’d’ve had a hard time saying definitively that it was. It was the sort of dish that tastes would probably be divided on. Especially for that first mouthful.

However, every time he ate it, it became more and more delicious to him. Once some time passed, he’d begin to crave it again. After all the times he’d eaten it, he was completely entranced with the stuff. Once every ten days—no, every five—no, no, if possible, every three days—he wanted to eat it.

There was a pile of large bowls stacked up in front of Ranta.

Seven, in total.

Ranta was about to polish off his eighth bowl of soruzo. The ninth bowl that he had just ordered would be coming out soon.

Freshly-made soruzo was hot. Damn hot, in fact. But Ranta didn’t want to waste time blowing on it, so he dug right in.

He'd burned the inside of his mouth. Honestly, he couldn't even tell what it tasted like anymore. His belly was hurting, too. He was starting to look like a pregnant woman.

At this point, eating was nothing but suffering, but Ranta didn't stop. This last sip would finish his eighth bowl.

"—Bwahh....! I sure ate!" he exclaimed.

At that same moment, the ninth bowl arrived. When the heavy steam from it washed over him, he got dizzy.

The scent from that perfect harmony of chicken bones, pork fat, onions, and carrots should have whet his appetite for more, but it only gave Ranta heartburn now.

"Kid, are you okay?" The old man running the stall peered at Ranta's face.

Ranta gave him a nod, wiping his face off with one hand. It was a mess of sweat, and snot, and more sweat. He must have looked awful. But, damn it, he didn't care.

"—Okay!"

Ranta got to work on his ninth bowl. With each noodle he slurped down, he felt a little nauseous. When it felt like it was all going to come back up, he quickly covered his mouth.

—I'm not gonna puke.

I swear I won't puke.

Like I'd let myself do that.

I've gotta eat. I'll eat, and eat, and eat some more. I'll eat everything.

"Someday, let's do it. Open a restaurant."

Ranta's comrade's—no, his partner's face came to mind.

That time, Moguzo… he thought. *Seriously… seriously, he had a better look on his face than I'd ever seen before.*

"But, me, I don't want to open a soruzo place, I want to make ramen. I'll save up money, study, and when I can make ramen that tastes just right, let's do it, let's open that restaurant."

"…Sure."

Ranta could respond all he wanted, but it wouldn't reach his partner.

All I can do is eat. Right now, I've just gotta eat. I'm gonna slurp away like crazy at the soruzo my partner loved. I'll eat all I can eat. I'll eat even once I can't eat. Even if I'm full, even if I don't want to eat anymore, I'll just keep eating. Eat. Eat, damn you.

"Urrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrgh!"

Because, man.

Because.

—Because.

"Becaushe shyou can't eat anymorshe…!" Ranta wailed.

Right, partner? he thought, grief-stricken. *No matter how much you want to eat, you can't eat anymore.*

Ranta was going to eat his partner's share. What was the point in that? Like he cared. He didn't know what the point was. It didn't matter. Ranta just thought it was what he ought to do. He couldn't help but think it, and so he couldn't bear not to do it.

"Gwehhh…! Pops! One more bowl!"

"B-But, come on, kid," the geezer protested.

“It’s fine! Just hurry up and give it to me!” Ranta shouted.

“O-Okay.”

“Bowl number nine!” Ranta screamed.

Just a little more, and he’d be done with his ninth bowl. Ranta spurred himself to go faster. He was trying to speed up, but for some reason the amount of noodles just wasn’t going down. His hands stopped. A dark wave of nausea struck. He couldn’t breathe. He felt like he was going to suffocate.

Then, he suddenly realized. There was a lot of noise around him. When he looked, there were craftsmen and volunteer soldiers all around him.

What? They’re all staring at me. What for…?

“Hey, that guy, his next bowl’ll be his tenth, you know?” someone pointed out.

“Whoa… Seriously…?”

“No way.”

“Is that normal?”

“I couldn’t do it…”

“Awesome…”

“I mean, isn’t that crazy?”

“Still, he’ll start struggling soon.”

“You said it.”

“Of course he will. Ten bowls? I don’t think he can do it. I just can’t see it. Not ten bowls. That’s tough.”

“Yeah, that has to be too much.”

“Not ten bowls.”

“Hmph…” Ranta snorted. He felt something weird when he did. Was there something caught in his nose? He went fishing for it, and it turned out to be a soruzo noodle. He considered throwing it away, but his partner never would’ve done that. Ranta threw the chunk of noodle he’d excavated from his nose back into his mouth.

“Hey, take a good look, guys,” he said proudly. “Ten bowls? That’s not even an obstacle to me. It’ll be easy. This is nothing.”

—I’m going for it.

Getting himself back in gear, Ranta rapidly polished off his ninth bowl. The tenth was coming. He felt dizzy, but that was no big deal.

“Bring it on!” Ranta stood up and brought the bowl to his mouth, pouring the damn hot noodles and broth together into his stomach. The crowd roared. Encouraged, or egged on, by those cheers, Ranta finished that tenth bowl in a little over ten seconds. Not just the noodles and other ingredients—every last drop of the broth, too.

“How do you like that, huh?!” he screamed. “Pops, get me the next one!”

“Comin’ up!” the old man called.

“Wooooo!”

“He did it!”

“This guy’s incredible!”

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Keep going!”

“Go as far as you can!”

"Go!"

"Do it!"

"Damn straight!" Ranta shouted, giving the thumbs up. "I'm Ranta! All of you, shout my great name!"

"Ranta!"

"Ranta!"

"Keep it up, Ranta!"

"Ranta!"

"Ranta...!"

"Pops, hurry it up!" Ranta bellowed.

"Righto! One bowl, ready to serve!" the old man called.

"Wahahahahaha! Eleven bowls!" With a laugh, Ranta started on his eleventh bowl of soruzo. For a moment he wondered why he was doing it, but what did he care at this point.

Eat. I'm gonna eat.

Watch me, partner.

Even if this is all I can do.

"Bwuh!" Ranta suddenly choked on something. A noodle shot out of his nose, and the crowd burst out laughing. He nearly snapped at them, but Ranta let out a big laugh instead.

Just how much can I eat? I'll take this to the limit. I'm eating 'til I drop.

Because someday, I'm gonna open up a restaurant. It'll be a ramen joint, not soruzo, just like my partner wanted. I've already

decided on the name. It'll be Ranta & Moguzo's Ramen Shop.

No, make that Moguzo & Ranta's.

4. The Conditions for Being the Worst

—Don't you think you've had enough?

It felt like someone had said that to her. Who? Probably the man next to her. She had no idea who he was supposed to be. Or what his face looked like.

She squinted her eyes and looked at him. He was too blurry. What was with this guy? Why was he sitting next to her? She didn't get it.

"...Who are you?" she asked.

"Huh? What do you mean, 'who'?" he asked.

"What are you doing there?" she asked.

"No, don't ask me what I'm doing here, we came here together, remember? To this place."

"You and who...?"

"Me and you, Merry."

"Why?" she asked.

The man looked exasperated. "Somebody's had too much to drink..."

"Who has?" she asked.

"You, of course."

"Have I...?"

Merry paused for a breath, then lifted her cup. She tried to take a swig, but it was empty.

—"This place"? What kind of place is it? She looked around. *Oh, it looks like a place that serves alcohol. It's small and cramped, and the only seats are at the bar. It's an unfamiliar place, one I don't recognize.*

When she thrust her cup out towards the man on the other side of the counter, who seemed to be the proprietor, and was about to say *Give me another one*, the man next to her grabbed her by the wrist.

"I'm telling you, it's time to stop."

"...Leave me alone," Merry murmured.

"Like I could," he shot back. "Do you have any clue how much you've drunk?"

"I don't know," she mumbled. "So what...?"

"No, not 'so what.'"

The man looked at her like he was fed up. What right did some guy that she didn't even recognize have to act like she was being a bother to him? It made her mad.

"...Fine, I don't need it, then."

Merry stood up. She stumbled a little, and the man caught her, but she brushed his hands away.

"Don't touch me!" she screamed.

"You looked like you were gonna trip," the man explained.

“So what?” she snapped. “If I trip… what’s wrong with that?”

“It’s not good.”

“Don’t try to push things on me like that.”

“Like what?” the man asked.

“The way you think… I don’t care what you think about me…”

What am I trying to say? What am I saying? I guess it doesn’t matter. It really doesn’t matter.

Merry left the bar.

The next thing she knew, she was somewhere else. It was dark. She was on the street.

“…Huh?” she mumbled.

My staff isn’t here. Did I forget to take it with me? Where did I leave it? I have no clue.

“Hey, are you okay?!”

Who could that be? Oh, the guy from before. Why is he here? What’s he following me for?

“What do you want?” she demanded.

When she asked, he gave her an indignant “Huhh?!”

He went on, “That’s some way to talk to the guy you’ve made treat you at two places now.”

“Treat me…?” Merry asked unsteadily. “What are you talking about?”

“Your drinks. You never paid, you know. I covered it all, Merry.”

“Why do you know my name?”

“Because you told me, obviously.”

“I did...? I’ll pay...”

She didn’t really get it, but she didn’t want him grumbling at her over it. Merry tried to pull out her money. If she gave him what she had on her, the man would probably be satisfied. Her hands were unsteady, though. Not just her hands, her legs were, too. She couldn’t stand.

When she felt like she was going to collapse, the man caught her in his arms.

“That’s not it, Merry,” the man said. “I’m not telling you to pay me money.”

“...Let go.”

“I don’t want to,” he said.

“I said, let go—”

Merry tried to escape from the man’s embrace. She couldn’t push him off her. The man’s arms were wrapped tightly around Merry. He brought his face close to hers. Merry put her hand on his chin and pushed upwards.

“I’m telling you...!”

“Shut up, bitch!” the man shouted. “After we’ve come this far, there’s no way I’m letting you go! I know you were looking for this, too!”

“What?! Looking for what?!”

“You were frustrated, so you thought you’d play around with me, right?! I can figure out that much!” he yelled.

"Play around...?"

What's this guy talking about? He's not making any sense. Play? I'm not in the mood. Doesn't this guy know what happened?

Suddenly, she felt cold inside.

"...What did I tell you?" Merry murmured.

"Huh?! What, you ask? Just your name, and... Well, just small talk..."

"Whew."

That's a major relief. If I'd opened up to a guy like this, that'd be awful. Even if I am drunk—Hey, wait.

Merry was drunk, and she was more than just tipsy. She was absolutely, totally, falling down drunk.

I'm in danger, she realized. *The state I'm in, and this situation. I'm definitely in danger. I need to run.*

Merry headbutted the man as hard as she could. He cried out in pain and flinched, but he didn't let go.

"Now you've gone and done it! No more Mr. Nice Guy!" he screamed.

"Ah—" Merry gasped.

He lifted her up. Her feet weren't touching the ground. Merry thrashed around like her life depended on it. However, the man's grip didn't loosen.

What was he planning to do with her? The man seemed to be carrying Merry somewhere. It was dark and she couldn't see very well, but he was trying to take her down a narrow alley.

When she tried to scream, he covered her mouth. Merry bit his

fingers. The man groaned in pain, throwing Merry to the ground. Merry landed on her butt, then hit her head on something.

"...Ouch... Ow..."

Her eyes were spinning. She needed to get away. She crawled away from him, but he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her into the alleyway, forcing her onto her back. He held her down, covering her mouth again.

Am I going to get raped? she thought. *Here? By this guy?*

No. Don't be ridiculous.

Merry kneed the man in the groin. "Take this!"

"Augh—" he gasped. "...D-Dammit! Why, you...!"

He punched her. In the face, with his fist. For a moment, she lost consciousness.

When she came to, he was trying to strip her out of her priest outfit.

I may not be able to do anything, Merry thought.

Maybe this is karma.

I mean, I let him die.

I let a comrade die, again.

Even though I'm a priest.

I'm responsible for protecting my comrades' lives, but I couldn't.

Merry couldn't even say she'd done the best she could. She had made a mistake.

Literally, a fatal mistake.

Protection. It was the most basic of basics for a priest who was moving from the beginner level to the intermediate level. This light magic spell boosted the physical abilities and resistances of the target, as well as their natural healing ability. It was vital that Protection not be allowed to wear off in combat. Little differences like that could mean the difference between life and death.

In a fight, there were any number of things that could happen. That was why, the instant the thirty minute duration expired, it was time to recast Protection. This was something every priest had to know. It was something they had to never forget. And yet— "Just give up already!" The man laughed perversely, pulling on her uniform. The sound of a seam tearing echoed through the alley. "I doubt this is your first time! This'll be easier on you if you try to enjoy it..."

"Yeah, no. There's no way she could enjoy this," another man's voice broke in.

The scumbag on top of her turned his head to look at the newcomer. "Huh...?"

"Sorry, but I'm not gonna hold back, okay?" the new man said.

"Wait—"

"Hah!"

The scumbag keeled over. He fell on top of Merry, but the other man was quick to pull him off of her.

"...Huh?" Merry asked, dazed.

I have no clue what just happened.

It looks like I've been saved, but why? Who is he?

"You okay?" the guy asked. "Can you get up?"

Merry was silent. The man who saved her from the scumbag sighed and scratched the back of his head.

"I dunno what to say... I'm not gonna try anything weird, okay?" he said. "Are your clothes and whatnot all right?"

He's awfully blunt, Merry thought. *But he did save me from a tight spot. That much is certain. If he hadn't come along, who knows what would have happened to me? Well, I probably would have been raped.*

Merry sat up, fixing her clothes. The sleeve of her priest outfit was torn. It was probably dirty too, but fine other than that.

"...I'm sorry," she mumbled. "Thank you."

"Sure," the new man said. "Uh. Well, if you're fine, I guess that's all that matters."

The alley was dark, so she could barely see the man's face. However, there was something—his voice, maybe? It sounded familiar. That, and the way he was dressed. The man was rather tall. Did Merry know him?

"Er..." the man said, taking half a step back. "I won't say anything. I'm not going to tell anyone about this. You'd probably prefer it that way, right?"

This man probably knew Merry, too. It sounded that way from the way he was talking.

"You're..." she said fuzzily.

"Me? Ah," the man said. "The name's Kuzaku. Not that you'd know it..."

True, the name Kuzaku wasn't ringing any bells.

When Merry stood up, Kuzaku took another step back. He seemed

to be trying to keep his distance. Maybe he was trying to show he had no intention of doing anything to her.

Merry looked down at the scumbag beside her. Kuzaku must have hit or kicked him hard enough to knock him unconscious. Merry could have kicked him once or twice herself, but she decided against it.

She left the alley. Kuzaku was a little ways away from her. Thanks to the moonlight, she could see his face better now. She finally recognized him.

"At Deadhead, you were in Green Storm Force with us..." she murmured.

"Ah. Maybe you do remember me, then?"

"But..."

"I nearly died," Kuzaku said, looking down. "...But I didn't. Someone healed me, and when I came to, I was the only one left, you know."

"...I see."

"Um," Kuzaku said uneasily.

"What?" Merry asked.

"Sorry," he said. "I should have stepped in sooner. To tell you the truth, I was watching. When you two left the bar. Something struck me as wrong, so I followed you. Then, well, you know what happened."

"...I must have been pretty awful," Merry mumbled.

"Nah," he said. "Not really. I mean, I was drinking, too."

"Kuzaku-kun." Merry bowed her head. "Let me apologize one more time. I'm sorry. And thank you."

Kuzaku fell silent for some time.

Then, finally, "...Okay," was all he said in reply.

"Goodbye," Merry said.

She raised her head and quickly walked past Kuzaku.

Of course, I still haven't sobered up. I'm nauseous. Just how much did I drink? I don't remember at all. Too much. This is the first time in my life that I've drunk so much that I can't remember what happened.

That guy should have messed me up while I still didn't know what was going on. If that'd happened, maybe I'd have been satisfied. Maybe I drank so much because I wanted that to happen. Maybe that's why I didn't chase off that scumbag when he came up next to me.

Kuzaku got in the way. He didn't need to get involved. But, if that scumbag really had raped me... Just the thought of it makes me sick. Disgusting. I can't stand people touching me. He touched me a lot. He groped me all over. He's the worst. This is the worst.

"Ugh..." With an unbearable wave of nausea sweeping over her, Merry stopped walking.

She wanted to throw up. But she didn't. She couldn't. She crouched down. She felt awful. She wanted to die. She just wanted to lie down and die. After all, others already had died.

Here was an incompetent priest who let her comrades die not once, but twice, and she had the gall to think that she wanted to just lay down and die. How could she think that?

"...I'm the worst," Merry mumbled.

5. This Mess

It's the middle of the night, that much I know, but what time is it now? Haruhiro thought. *That's not clear to me. All I know is that we've been here for quite a while.*

They were on Flower Garden Street in the northern district of Alterna. Why was it called Flower Garden? Haruhiro had no idea, but maybe there had been flowerbeds or something similar along it a long time ago.

Stretching out from the market, Flower Garden Street and its side streets had lodging houses running all the way up and down both sides of them. Near the entrance to the street there were a number of buildings that provided temporary accommodation for those passing through. As you got further from the market, the number of large buildings increased. Past those expensive-looking lodging houses with their majestic appearance, there were decent lodging houses, so-so lodging houses, and then finally the squalid outskirts filled with run-down old lodging houses.

Haruhiro and one other person were in front of a kind of decent lodging house not far down one of the side streets.

They had been standing in front of it at first, but now one of them was sitting with his back against the outer wall of the building. That was Haruhiro. The person with him was still standing.

They were both silent.

When had they last talked to one another? It felt like it had been a while. He didn't remember what they had said then, either. Neither Haruhiro nor the person with him were the talkative type. They were both reserved, you could say, or passive.

Hunching over and hugging one of his knees, Haruhiro thought, *That's why. That's why we're not a good match, probably.*

Neither Haruhiro nor his partner would take the first step, so nothing happened. The conversation never started.

This is awkward, he thought.

If the other person would say something, anything, to spark a conversation, he'd do his best to keep it going. The person with him likely felt the same way. They were probably both thinking, *Why aren't you saying anything? Say something!*

Okay, Haruhiro thought. *I get it. Fine, I'll do it. I'll totally do it. I'm so going to do it.*

"Um... er... Shihoru?" he ventured.

"...Huh?" she asked.

"Are you tired?" he asked.

"...I'm fine."

"Oh, you are."

"Yeah."

That was the end of it. He had worked up all the willpower he could muster to start that conversation, and it had died in no time.

What the hell? he thought indignantly. *That's not fair. Put a little more effort in. This is communication, you know, communication. It's important, really.*

Besides, why was he alone with Shihoru?

No... the reason, how it had happened, was clear. He had needed to get in touch with Merry regarding the paperwork and her share of the reward. Unbelievably, Ranta had eaten too much and couldn't move, while Yume had said she was too "funya-funya" to do it. Whatever that was supposed to mean. That was why he had left with Shihoru, who had been feeling fine and had known where Merry lived.

Merry was supposed to be staying in a women-only lodging house, so Haruhiro couldn't very well visit her on his own. On that point, he was glad Shihoru had come with him. But only on that point.

It wasn't that he disliked Shihoru. But she was hard to deal with when it was just the two of them.

They were a poor match for one another. Haruhiro and Shihoru didn't go together very well. That's what it was. Basically, they weren't compatible.

Shihoru may have felt the same way as Haruhiro did. Haruhiro wasn't thinking that because they weren't compatible, there was nothing he could do, and it was okay to let things stay the way they were. He did, however, think that Shihoru could be doing more to try to make things work.

When they had first come to this lodging house, Merry hadn't been here, so they'd tried going to Sherry's Tavern, but she hadn't been there either, so they'd come back here. In all that time, Shihoru had barely spoken. If Haruhiro asked her something, she would say a few words in response. That was all. Haruhiro wasn't sure how he should feel about that.

Haruhiro unintentionally let out a sigh.

Maybe his question had come off the wrong way. Still, it may have worked to break the ice for them.

"...I," Shihoru said in a small voice.

Haruhiro looked up at Shihoru. Shihoru was hugging her shoulders and trembling slightly.

"...Listen... I... If I tell you this... you may think I'm a horrible person... but I'm mostly feeling fine."

"Feeling fine—wait, what do you mean by that?" Haruhiro asked, dumbfounded.

"I'm not... like everyone else," said Shihoru. "I'm not going through as much shock..."

"You... aren't?" he asked.

"Isn't that horrible of me?" she said. "Even I... think it is. If anything... more than being shaken up by Moguzo's death... I'm not that sad that Moguzo died... and I'm shocked at myself for that, and it depresses me. I realized... I'm really an unpleasant person..."

"That's not—"

—true, Haruhiro wanted to say, but could he really? *Moguzo died, yet she's not that affected by it? That's crazy. I mean, he was one of us. We were together, through good times and bad. Moguzo was our precious, all-too-precious comrade, and he was the core of the party. Why isn't she shocked by it?*

Then again, Shihoru seems bewildered by that herself. She ought to feel a heart-rending, mind-numbing sadness and sense of loss, but she doesn't, and she feels there's something abnormal about that. She can't forgive herself for it, and she's suffering. —Oh, I get it.

It's Manato.

This was pure speculation, but it was probably because of what had happened with Manato.

Shihoru was probably in love with Manato. Manato, who she was head over heels in love with, died. That must have been harder on

Shihoru than any of us. Of course, with Moguzo dying, Shihoru must have felt some pain, but it was nothing like last time.

People could get used to suffering. Even if they didn't want to, they naturally got used to it.

Because if they didn't, they couldn't go on living.

For as long as they were alive, things like this would happen. Because life was an endless cycle of things like this.

If it knocked them down every time, and they couldn't get back up, they wouldn't be able to go on living.

In fact—in fact, Haruhiro wasn't stunned and in a daze anymore, the way he had been just after they had lost Moguzo. He might not be doing a good job of it, but he was trying to move forward. He was thinking about how he wanted everyone to look towards the future. How, if they didn't, Moguzo wouldn't be able to rest in peace. Just like that, he was using his dead comrade to give himself the power to keep living.

Haruhiro was trying to live. Sneakily, greedily, tenaciously, he wanted to live.

Shihoru must have been the same. Manato's death had made Shihoru stronger. By becoming stronger, Shihoru was trying to live.

"Shihoru, you're not horrible," Haruhiro said. "You're not an unpleasant person. I'm glad you came here with me. That you're here with me now. I really do think that."

Shihoru was going to say something, but she closed her mouth and looked away. Her shoulders were still trembling. She might have been holding back tears. After some time, Shihoru sniffled just once.

"...Haruhiro-kun, I'm glad you're here. I think... that, too."

"Uh, well... yeah," Haruhiro said. "That's better than you not

wanting me here...”

Haruhiro covered his face with his hands. He felt incredibly embarrassed. He felt guilty that he was able to be bashful now. Honestly, whenever he ate, whenever he drank, whenever he slept, he wanted to apologize to Moguzo. Not that apologizing would change anything.

Someday, this prickling pain in his chest would fade, then disappear entirely. He would get used to this suffering.

He wanted to live, so he would get used to it so that he could live on.

“Merry sure is late,” he said to cover his embarrassment. “Where’s she gone off to?”

“...Really, I don’t know Merry all that well, so... I couldn’t say,” said Shihoru.

"Yeah, I know, right?" Haruhiro said. "But, I mean, I'm a guy. It's hard for me to be close with her."

"I don't think that just being the same gender means we'll be able to be close..." Shihoru said quietly.

"Is that how it is?" Haruhiro asked.

"You... know what I'm like," said Shihoru. "If I were bubbly like Yume, maybe it would be a different story..."

"Hmm," he said. "I don't think being bubbly will always help though, you know? I mean, Yume's fine. She seems like she could get along with just about anybody. So long as it isn't someone like Ranta."

"...Ranta-kun might be an exception," Shihoru agreed.

"That guy's an idiot. Seriously. What the hell is he doing, overeating like that? I don't get him."

"...He was probably eating soruzo, don't you think?" Shihoru asked.

"Huh?"

"This is just a guess, but... maybe he was trying to eat Moguzo's share, too..."

"Ahh..." Haruhiro tugged at his hair. *I see. That was it. I didn't understand a thing. I wasn't seeing anything. It was Ranta's way of paying his respects.*

Haruhiro laughed just a little. He felt a pang in his heart.

"Yeah, you're definitely not an unpleasant person, Shihoru," he said. "It's amazing for you to be able to understand another person's feelings like that."

Shihoru shook her head. Then, she crouched down. "I think...

Merry," she said, forcing the words out, "she has more regrets than any of us. She's in the most pain. Because she's the priest..."

Haruhiro nodded. He felt that he understood that much. *After all, it's her second time.*

Merry had lost a comrade, multiple comrades, once before. The weight of that responsibility had changed her and Merry wasn't the same person she had been before that.

After teaming up with Haruhiro and the party, she had finally started to show a smile every once in a while. But just when she'd started to, she had lost another comrade.

On top of that, Merry was a priest. As the one who had light magic that could heal wounds, she was the party's lifeline. That was to say, she was in a position where her comrades' lives were her responsibility. It would be little wonder if she blamed herself entirely for what happened.

It might have been presumptuous of him, but right now Haruhiro was more worried about Merry than anyone else.

"...I just hope she hasn't gotten any strange ideas," he said out loud. Now that he'd said that, he worried about it all the more.

That was why, when he heard footsteps, looked up, and saw a figure in white clothes there, he felt an incredible sense of relief.

"Merry!"

"...Why?" That was all Merry said before turning heel and walking the other direction.

"—Huh?" Haruhiro gasped. "Wait, Merry, you're running?!"

"H-Haruhiro-kun, we have to go after her!" cried Shihoru.

"Ah! Right!"

Luckily, Merry wasn't very fast at running away. Actually, Merry wasn't steady on her feet at all. She wasn't so much running as somehow managing to keep going forward despite being ready to fall over.

When Haruhiro caught her, she immediately brushed his hand off, but Merry didn't try to run any further. Maybe she couldn't have run even if she'd tried.

Merry turned her back to Haruhiro and Shihoru, collapsing to her knees. "...What? Do you need something?"

"'Something'—yeah, we kind of do," said Haruhiro. "But, wait, Merry, have you been drinking?"

"Is it wrong for me to?" she mumbled.

"Well, no, there's nothing wrong with it," he hesitated.

"...Leave me alone," she mumbled. "Don't concern yourself with me."

"I can't just leave you alone," Shihoru said, crouching down next to Merry. "I can't do it."

"...Why not?" Merry demanded.

"Because... it bothers me. Seeing you in this state... I can't just pretend I don't know anything."

"...I didn't want to be seen," mumbled Merry. "Not like this. Why are you here?"

"We came here... to see you, Merry," said Shihoru.

"I... don't want to see you, at all."

"We don't feel the same way."

"I don't want to see you!" Merry shouted.

She was coherent, but Merry was obviously very drunk. Well, of course she wouldn't want them to see her like that. That was natural. Haruhiro didn't want to see Merry like this, either. It might have been better if he hadn't. But he had. He couldn't pretend otherwise.

"Merry," he said.

"...What?" she asked unsteadily.

"Eight o'clock, in front of the north gate," he said. "Maybe you're not going to be able to make it. Looking at you now."

Haruhiro tried waiting. No matter how long he waited, Merry gave no response. She didn't say a thing. Instead, she stood up and walked away. It looked like she planned to go back to her lodging house.

Shihoru tried to follow Merry. Haruhiro stopped Shihoru, and called after Merry.

"We aren't done yet. It's okay to stop and stand still, but we have to move forward."

Merry went inside without responding.

6. Even If We Falter

The morning of the next day—actually, the same day, come to think of it—they waited for the time it took the bell to ring once, or until ten o'clock, but Merry didn't appear at the north gate.

The next day, they waited for two hours again, but Merry never came. Ranta proclaimed loudly that they should storm into Merry's room, but Haruhiro and Shihoru firmly opposed the idea. As for Yume, she was still feeling funya-funya, but she was getting better.

Then, on the third day, Haruhiro and the others arrived at the north gate just before the eight o'clock bell rang.

"Oh..." Ranta said, surprised.

Shihoru inhaled sharply.

Yume said, "Meow."

Haruhiro smiled just a little, covering his mouth with one hand. Every time he smiled, the dull pain returned in his chest.

There was a woman in priestly garb leaning against the short staff she was carrying for support standing in a corner by the north gate. She was looking down, as if she were counting the toes on her feet. She wasn't especially petite, and yet she looked very small right now.

"Merry!" Haruhiro called.

Merry looked up and turned to face them. She looked back down

right away, though maybe she was nodding.

I guess it doesn't matter which, Haruhiro thought. *Yeah. It doesn't matter which. Merry's here. We didn't force her to come. We didn't beg her to, either. Merry came of her own free will.*

Haruhiro and the others ran up to Merry. Shihoru walked up to Merry first, shaking her hand without a word. Merry didn't reject it.

Yume suddenly gave Merry a flying tackle hug.

"Eek!" Merry screamed, apparently scared out of her wits.

Well, Haruhiro was taken aback, too. Of course she'd be surprised.

"Sorry 'bout that, Merry-chan," Yume said, hugging Merry as tightly as she could and rubbing her face up against Merry like a cat. "Really, sorry."

"Huh—wh-what for...?" Merry stammered.

"For leavin' you alone," said Yume. "Sorry 'bout that. Yume had Shihoru there for her, but, Merry-chan, you didn't have anyone with you. At an awful time like this, too. Sorry. Yume won't leave you alone anymore, so she hopes you'll forgive her. Yume's gonna be by your side."

"...I'm..." Merry said, her eyes darting around.

At first, Haruhiro thought she was just confused, But it seemed that wasn't the case. Merry's face was hot and flushed. She was red right up to the tips of her ears.

Merry gritted her teeth. She looked like she was enduring and doing the best she could to hold it in.

Maybe she's about to cry—is that it? Haruhiro thought.

"I'm..." she began.

“It’s okay,” Yume declared. “Merry-chan, no matter what you say now, Yume, she’s already made her mind up. She’s not going to leave you alone anymore. Yume, from now on, she’s gonna stay at the same lodgin’ house as you. That’s what Yume’s decided. Shihoru’s gonna be with us, too.”

Haruhiro looked at Shihoru. “...You are?”

“I... think so?” Shihoru said, wearing an awkward expression that was somewhere between a forced smile and utter confusion. “...I might recall... talking about that last night... Vaguely...”

“Vaguely, huh...” said Haruhiro.

“Heh!” Ranta brushed his nose with his thumb. “Well, if that’s how it’s gonna be, then there’s only one choice. I’m gonna rent a room at Merry’s place, too!”

“*You* can’t,” Merry turned an icy cold look towards Ranta. “As a general rule, the place I’m rooming at is off limits to men.”

"Wh-Whaaat?!" Ranta yelped. "C-Can't you do something?! Hey, wait, if it's a general rule, that means there can be exceptions, right?! I was born special, so I must be an exception, obviously!"

"The only exception is for small children," she said coldly. "That means mothers with children are fine."

"Alrighty then! Fine, from today forward, Merry, I'm gonna be your son! It'd be weird to say I'm your real son, though, so we'll say I'm adopted, yeah, adopted! How's that! Now, there's no problems, right?!"

Haruhiro muttered, "There are nothing *but* problems with that..."

"Shut your face, Parupiro! It's not for you to decide! Now then, Merry, you're my momma starting today! Welcome to the family, Momma!"

Merry patted Yume on the back and sighed. "I think I'll go home..."

"Noooo!" Yume cried, squeezing Merry tightly. "Merry-chan, don't go! When stupid Ranta opens his mouth, you don't have to pay attention to a thing he says! You know Ranta's just a numskull and a nincompoop."

"Who're you calling a nincompoop?" Ranta shouted. "Especially when you've got tiny tits!"

"Don't call them tiny!" Yume flared.

"Hey, it's not my fault you've got tiny tits!"

"Well, Ranta, you're way flatter than Yume, so there!" she shot back.

"I'm a man, damn it! I wasn't competing with you on breast size to begin with!"

"Well, what are you competin' over the size of, then?!"

“Huh?! Well, obviously...” Ranta looked down to his crotch, then glanced over at Haruhiro. “...Right?”

“No, don’t look to me for agreement here...” said Haruhiro.

“Hrmm?” Yume tilted her head to the side in confusion.

“Um...” Merry said, squirming uncomfortably in the tight grip of Yume’s arms. “...I won’t leave. So, for now, could you let go of me?”

“Whuh?! Was Yume hurtin’ you? Sorry ’bout that.” Yume let go of her. “Yume, she’s pretty strong, y’know. Lately, her arms’ve been gettin’ real beefy, and she’s gonna have a six-pack one of these days, she was tellin’ Shihoru. If that happens, Shihoru was sayin’, maybe if Yume’s chest muscles grow, her boobs might get bigger too.”

“...Y-Yume,” Shihoru stammered. “That’s enough about that...”

“Nwuh? Why?”

“It’s not something to talk about in front of the boys...”

“It’s not?” Yume asked.

“Ha!” Ranta laughed nasally. You’ve got no delicacy, Yume. That’s your problem!”

“Yume doesn’t have any telepathy, but neither do you, Ranta!” she shot back.

“As if I would! Besides, it’s not telepathy, it’s delicacy! Delicacy!”

Good grief, things sure have gotten lively here, Haruhiro thought, scratching the back of his neck. *But, well, thanks to Ranta and Yume, the mood has lightened up.*

First, Haruhiro talked to Merry about business. They decided they would all go to the Volunteer Soldier Corps Office after this to fill out the paperwork. Then they’d need to take their 60 gold worth of military scrip to the Yorozu Deposit Company, convert it to gold, and

divide up the money. He figured it would probably be a good idea to deposit The Chopper, as well.

"—So, the question is, what we do from here on?" Haruhiro asked, keeping his tone as light as he could manage. The reality they were facing was a harsh one, and they were all feeling like they might be crushed under its oppressive weight. He didn't want to make things any heavier than they had to be. "I've thought things over a bit, you know. For now, why don't we try going to Damuro?"

"Ooh," Yume said excitedly. "That means gobbies."

"Heh!" Ranta frowned and crossed his arms. "For us now, don't you think they're a little out of their reach, trying to take us on?"

"...I think you mean 'out of their league'..." Shihoru murmured.

"Hm? Did you say something, Shihoru?" Ranta asked loudly.

"Never mind..." she said. "Forget it... I know there's no cure for stupidity..."

"Hey, I definitely heard that one, you know?" Ranta complained.

"Damuro..." Merry said, casting her eyes downwards.

"They've been calling us the Goblin Slayers all this time, after all," Haruhiro said it jokingly, but Merry's expression didn't lighten at all.

It's too much to expect it right away. It's going to take time. Take it step by step. Rushing things won't help.

"We've been frequenting the Cyrene Mines lately, so we've gotten used to kobolds, but if we go there, we have to go down at least three floors," he said. "I think that's risky. I hear the temporary state of emergency in the Old City of Damuro seems to have been lifted, and we know almost every nook and cranny of the place. If we choose our locations well and don't overextend ourselves, I don't think it should be that dangerous."

“The way you think is as passive as ever, huh, Haruhiro?” Ranta asked, with an exaggerated shrug of his shoulders. “But it’s okay, I guess? I think it’s not a bad idea, for now, at least.”

“Wow, Ranta-kun isn’t complaining for once…” Shihoru murmured.

“Who do you take me for, Shihoru?” Ranta shouted. “I’ve always been a guy who tells it like it is, you know? If it’s good, I say it’s good. If it’s bad, I say it’s bad. If I have something to say, I say it! If I want to do something, I do it! In other words, I’m a real man!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Haruhiro muttered.

“Haruhiroooo! No, Parepiruroooo! Don’t try to just let what I’m saying drift by!”

“If anything, I’d like to throw you in a river and let you drift away,” Haruhiro said.

“Fine by me! Bring it! Just you try! If you can throw me in a river, do it, damn you!”

“Nah, I’ll pass,” said Haruhiro. “It’s too much of a bother.”

“Ba-boing.” Ranta sprung forward in a straight line. He might have been trying to act funny to get a laugh out of them, but obviously no one so much as giggled. Ranta, however, was undaunted and tried it again a few times. “Ba-boing. Ba-boing. Ba-boing!”

The repeated attempts not only didn’t get a laugh, they were only making everyone less and less amused, so it was impressive that he could keep doing it without his heart breaking. Ranta started working funny faces into his ba-boing jump routine.

Yume let out an exasperated sigh and shook her head.

Merry was looking at Ranta with pity at this point.

Shihoru shuddered. "...So creepy."

"Ba-boing!" Ranta shouted. "Ba-boing! Ba-boing, ba-boing, ba-boing!"

Ranta looks happy, Haruhiro thought. *He enjoys it when people are creeped out by him. Is he a masochist? Still, Shihoru has been poking fun at Ranta an awful lot today. Maybe she's thought about it and has some reason for it.*

Haruhiro ignored Ranta, looking instead to Yume, Shihoru, and Merry. "Does anyone else have an opinion?"

"Yume thinks she's okay with it," Yume declared.

"...I think it's fine, too," said Shihoru.

"Me, too," Merry said, bringing a hand to her chest and taking a short breath. "I'm fine with it."

Things weren't like they were before. Of course they weren't. Haruhiro and the party had lost someone they couldn't afford to lose. There was no one who could replace Moguzo. Not anywhere. It wasn't possible.

Was there nothing that could to begin to fill the great, all too great, holes that had been gouged into, and between, the members of the party?

Well, if not, what should we do? Haruhiro wondered.

He didn't know right now. However, he knew that not knowing the answer didn't make it okay to leave things as they were. If he didn't know the answer, he had to seek out and find it.

Haruhiro nodded.

"Let's go."

7. Unable to Cling to Past Glories

He had to find something.

Something that they could do in their current situation.

He didn't expect it to go well from the very beginning, of course. It wasn't going to be that simple. But still, things couldn't be the way they were before.

"Ranta! I told you not to get too far away!" Haruhiro shouted.

Haruhiro was using Swat to endure Goblin A's attacks as he tried to get a sense of how the battle was going.

Goblin A was equipped with a leather helmet, chain mail, a short sword, and a small shield, but it wasn't big like an orc, so its individual attacks didn't have much weight behind them. Even one-on-one, it wouldn't be too much of a challenge. The problem was Ranta.

"I haven't gone *that* far!" Ranta said, right before shouting "Exhaust...!" and rapidly falling back. Goblin B chased after Ranta as if it was being sucked in. Ranta immediately thrust his longsword out and forward. "Take this! Avoid!"

However, Goblin B, with its somewhat muscular build and heavy equipment, managed to narrowly avoid Ranta's longsword. Actually, his longsword scraped the goblin's armor halfway between its neck and shoulder, but that wasn't going to be enough to deal any real damage. Goblin B undauntedly continued to close in.

Ranta slammed his longsword into Goblin B, shouting, “Reject!”

It was good that he managed to knock it away and make it pull back, but...

“Grin! You’re mine! Hatred!” Ranta shouted.

He stepped into it and swung down with all his might, and he did manage to hit Goblin B’s shoulder. However, that wasn’t enough. It was the armor. Ranta’s longsword only dented its armor, and was unable to cut through.

“You’re too aggressive!” Haruhiro called while parrying Goblin A’s sword.

“Oh, shut up!” Ranta shouted back angrily, showering Goblin B with a flurry of blows. “Take that, and that, and that, and that!”

Goblin B was recoiling, but it was also possible to view that as it successfully defending itself.

This is why just trying to push through with brute force is no good. Do you get that, Ranta?

“You’re not—”

—Moguzo, okay?

Haruhiro almost said it, but he stopped himself just in time. *I can’t say that. I mean, Ranta’s doing what he can.*

Ranta had charged right into the middle of the enemy, trying to tank for the party. However, Ranta was fundamentally different from Moguzo; he wasn’t the heavy type that stood there and traded blows with the enemy. The dread knight’s fighting style was all about using their mobility to toy with the enemy and mesmerize them. He had no choice but to move around. If he didn’t, Ranta couldn’t use his full power.

Ranta was different. He wasn't a tank. The party needed to make fundamental changes to their tactics.

And? What are our new tactics going to be...?

"Oh!" Haruhiro tried to use Swat on Goblin A's sword, but his hand slipped. Goblin A pressed in on him. *Oh, sh—*

"Hah...!" he heard someone shout.

Merry. Merry had jumped in. She thrust her short staff at Goblin A. The goblin blocked her staff with its shield, jumping back.

"Is now the time to be lost in thought?!" she shouted.

"S-Sorry, Merry!" Haruhiro called.

"Focus!"

Right, Haruhiro answered mentally as he attacked Goblin A. Well, he pretended to, to be more precise. *If Goblin A counterattacks, I'll immediately switch back to using Swat. If I can somehow chain Arrest with Swat to neutralize Goblin A, I want to do that, but I don't think it's likely. Goblins are a bit too small for that. I've never used Arrest on a goblin before. Dammit, what the hell is this? Even now that I've lost my orc-killing virginity, I'm still struggling to take on a goblin one-on-one in a straight-up fight? I'm way too weak. I mean, I knew that. I knew I was weak.*

"Ohm, rel, ect, nemun, darsh!"

Shihoru cast a spell. It was Shadow Bond. A shadow element flew out, sticking to a spot on the ground. Goblin C, who was crossing swords with Yume, stepped on it with its right foot.

Nice one, Shihoru, Haruhiro thought.

Goblin C hurriedly stepped down with its left foot, trying to pull its right foot free, but the shadow elemental held it fast and it couldn't

get away.

"Funyaa!" yelled Yume.

Yume leapt at Goblin C, using a combination of Brush Clearer and Diagonal Cross. Goblin C carried a hatchet-like weapon and also wore chain mail, so it wasn't a lethal blow. Still, Yume clobbered its shoulders, arms, and torso with her machete, so it had to be in a lot of pain. Goblin C flailed around wildly with its hatchet. It was clearly acting out of desperation, but Yume fell back. Yume only wore leather armor, so it would be dangerous for her to take a hit.

"Yume!" Haruhiro shouted.

Just by calling her name, Yume glanced in Haruhiro's direction and seemed to understand what he wanted to do. Yume was running his way now.

Haruhiro used Swat on Goblin A's sword, then immediately took off at a run. Goblin A tried to chase Haruhiro, but Yume took over the fight and stopped it.

Goblin C was still caught in the Shadow Bond spell. It noticed Haruhiro and tried to turn to face him, but it was too slow. Actually, with its leg trapped, not only could it not move, it couldn't change the way it faced, either. With his opponent like that, it went without saying that Haruhiro could easily get behind it.

Haruhiro circled around behind Goblin C and then jumped on it. He pinned its arms behind its back, quickly slitting its throat. When he jumped away, Goblin C fell to its knees. Because its right foot was still stuck to the ground, it couldn't quite fall over.

"—Yes! Finally, one down!" Haruhiro shouted.

Yume was fighting Goblin A, and Ranta was fighting Goblin B. Haruhiro could try to get a clear shot at either of their backs.

Should it be A or B? he wondered. *Goblin B's wearing what looks*

like decent armor, so it'll probably cause more trouble. Guess I'll finish off Goblin A first.

When he was about to start running, he felt the dull impact of something striking his left flank. Like maybe he'd been kicked.

"Huh... Wha...?"

When he looked down, there was an arrow sticking out of his left side.

What is this?

"Why— Where did it come from?!"

He was more shocked than hurt. At least, for the moment.

Haruhiro looked around the area.

Judging from the direction—over there, he thought. *To the left and a little to the rear. There's a wall that's about 80% collapsed. It'd be hard for a human to hide behind it, but a goblin could.*

"They've got backup!" Haruhiro shouted.

"Haru, let me heal that!" Merry tried to rush over to him.

"No!" Haruhiro shook his head, turning towards the wall. "Merry, you watch Shihoru!"

While Merry was healing Haruhiro with light magic, the enemy might snipe Shihoru. Or perhaps it might even take a shot at Merry herself. That would be bad.

"Urkh!" Haruhiro groaned as he ran.

When I run, my side does hurt pretty badly. Still, it's not enough to keep me from moving. I can take it.

Though, that said, Haruhiro didn't know what he was going to be

able to do there by himself. That was questionable. However, right now, he felt like it wouldn't be a good idea to have Merry treat him. That was because if Haruhiro were the goblin, he would take advantage of that opening. Goblins might be smaller than humans, but they weren't stupid.

Haruhiro ran at full speed to get to the other side of the wall. He was shocked by what he saw.

"It's not here?!"

Then an arrow flew at him from the right. He reacted in time to get down and avoid it, but it was a close call. The fat little Goblin D with its bow was poking out halfway from behind a pile of rubble seven to eight meters away. Goblin D had predicted Haruhiro would come after it, so it had moved from here to there.

Honestly, you're no idiot, Haruhiro thought.

"But I won't let you get away now!" he shouted.

Goblin D was trying to nock an arrow. However, at this range, it would be easy to tell not only when it would fire, but where it was aiming, too. Even if it got a shot off, he could dodge it. At least, that was how it should have been.

Haruhiro started to feel woozy.

His heart was acting weird. He could hear his pulse, and it sounded like someone violently stamping their feet. It was beating crazily fast.

Goblin D fired. Of course, Haruhiro tried to dodge. But, well, you know. He couldn't move quite the way he intended to.

The arrow stabbed into the left side of his chest, just below the shoulder, and Haruhiro fell on his butt.

Whoa, I've taken two hits now.

“Poisoned arrows!” Haruhiro shouted as loudly as he could.

Goblin D threw its bow aside, pulling out a short sword and jumping at him.

What now? Use Swat? I can’t. Not a chance.

Goblin D pushed Haruhiro to the ground and mounted him. It was trying to stab him in the face with its short sword. Maybe he had dropped it, he wasn’t sure, but Haruhiro didn’t have his dagger. He could only try to cover his face with his arms.

Goblin D’s short sword sliced into his arms and hands. Haruhiro was desperate.

He shouldn’t have had time for thinking, but he thought, *Damn, I messed this up. Maybe I shouldn’t have come here myself. Maybe it would’ve been better to leave it to Yume. But that didn’t occur to me. Maybe I only think that now because I’ve seen the result. The result. This is the result. It was all too quick. When you make a mistake, this is how it goes. Still, to think I’d be taken out by a goblin. No, no, no. That’s not a sure thing just yet. Yeah, that’s right. It’s not. It’s really not.*

Goblin D swung its short sword down again. Haruhiro used the bones in his right arm to sweep it aside.

There was a proverb, “Let your flesh be cut in order to break an opponent’s bones,” but he had used his own bones to defend himself instead.

“Ohm, rel, ect, vel, darsh!”

Huh? Magic? Shihoru? It’s Shihoru.

Shihoru stuck her staff practically in Goblin D’s face, unleashing her Shadow Beat spell at point blank range. Haruhiro heard its characteristic *vwong* sound, and immediately Goblin D’s head was thrown backwards. The shadow elemental, which looked like a black

ball of seaweed, had struck the side of Goblin D's face.

Shihoru wasn't the only one who'd come to save Haruhiro.

"Ha!" Merry bludgeoned Goblin D with her short staff.

Goblin D was knocked flying, but it soon got back up. It ran. It even managing to pick up its bow as it did. Shihoru pointed her staff at Goblin D's back.

"Ohm, rel, ect, vel, darsh!"

Another Shadow Beat. Goblin D, however, suddenly jumped behind cover and avoided the shadow elemental. It depended on where you were, but the ruins of buildings and walls were all over the place in Damuro's Old City. There were a lot of them in this area.

Why did we choose this place as our hunting grounds? Haruhiro wondered. *Had we failed from the moment we made that decision?*

"Whew... Huff... Whew... Whew..."

That's some terrible breathing. Whose is it? Oh, mine, huh.

It was Haruhiro himself. Haruhiro lay on his back. He could see the sky. That and Merry's face. She pulled the arrow out.

Ow... That hurts.

"I'll dispel the poison first!" Merry said.

Haruhiro nodded.

Is she going to make it in time? he wondered vaguely, as if it were someone else's problem. *Hopefully I won't die.*

"O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you... Purify."

"Dispel the poison," he thought. *That means she's erasing the poison now. Has it disappeared with that spell now? The poison. I*

don't really know. I wonder if Ranta and Yume are okay. And what about the goblin that ran off?

"Haru! Keep a firm hold of your senses! O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you... Cure!"

Senses. My senses. I have to keep ahold of them. Firmly. Yeah. I get it. I get it, Merry. That's right. This is pitiful. I look ridiculously lame. But I can't let myself die. I can't die. If I die, it's all over. Not just for me. For my comrades, too. All of us.

I'm gradually starting to feel better, he realized. *Magic's amazing.*

"How about over there?!" Ranta called out from somewhere.

"No sign of it!" Yume responded from far away.

What're those two doing?

Shihoru was next to Merry as she treated him. Their eyes met.

"...Shihoru, what happened to the enemies?" Haruhiro managed.

"There's just the one that ran off..." she answered.

"I see."

They mopped up the rest of them, then, he thought. *Ranta, Yume, and Shihoru did their best without me.*

Haruhiro closed his eyes, then laughed. "What am I even doing?"

Once the words left his mouth, he realized he shouldn't have said them. Neither Shihoru or Merry had any response, which only made it more embarrassing.

It looked like his healing was done, so Haruhiro opened his eyes and sat up. He was about to thank Merry when Ranta came running over.

"You damn idiot! What're you nearly getting yourself killed for?! Don't you dare get killed by some measly goblin! Just how much of a moron are you?! You're more worthless than a ball of snot!"

"...I don't really have a comeback for that," said Haruhiro.

But you don't need to lay into me quite so hard. No, I know, I deserve it this time, so I can't complain if you want to insult me.

I messed up. That's what it feels like.

Not only that, but I had to do it here, on today of all days.

This was supposed to be the day the party set out anew. It was an important day. They absolutely couldn't afford to fail. That's why they had chosen this place. Damuro's Old City. The place where they once earned their nickname, the "Goblin Slayers."

It may have been half teasing, or, rather, nine parts mocking and one part astonishment, but Haruhiro and the party had frequented Damuro's Old City long enough that people had started to call them that. Maybe this had happened because Haruhiro and the others had killed too many goblins. They had shifted their hunting grounds to the Cyrene Mines because the goblins had wound up on high alert, but they knew this place like the back of their hands. Even without Moguzo, a pillar—no, the central pillar—of the party, they should have been able to handle it somehow.

Had they gotten careless? They might have. They might not have. Honestly, Haruhiro didn't know. He couldn't look at it with a clear head.

"What do you wanna do about the gobbie that got away?!" Yume shouted off in the distance, to which Ranta angrily replied, "Just leave it! It's run off somewhere! I'm sure it won't be back!"

"Don't you think that's taking things too easy?" Shihoru asked.

"Huh?! Did you say something, Shihoru?!" Ranta shouted.

“I said, I think that’s taking things too easy… Did you not hear me?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ranta demanded. “You trying to say I’m being too shortsighted or something?”

“…If you want to sum it up, that might be it,” Shihoru said.

“You’re being awfully confrontational,” Ranta snapped. “If you want to pick a fight with me, I hope you’re ready for the consequences, right?”

“Don’t talk like you’re trying to threaten me,” Shihoru said.

“I’m not threatening you. You were getting saucy with me, so I’m just a little pissed.”

“…I don’t think that’s any excuse.”

“Why should I have to make excuses?” Ranta demanded. “Don’t give me that. I may be a tolerant guy, but even I have limits. If you don’t cut it out—”

“Heeeeey!” Yume rushed over and bonked Ranta on the head.

“Ow! Dammit, Yume! Whaddaya think you’re doing?!” he shouted.

“What’s a woddaya?! Don’t go talkin’ nonsense!” Yume shot back.

“You’re the one who’s nonsensical! There’s no way I make less sense than you!” Ranta hollered.

“Oh, be quiet, you dolt!” Yume shouted, hugging Shihoru tight. “You were bullyin’ Shihoru just now! Where do you get off doin’ that, huh, Ranta?! Yume’ll murderize you, you idiot!”

“I’m not bullying her! We were just having an exchange of opinions, clearly!” Ranta shouted.

“…How?” Shihoru muttered.

Ranta glared at Shihoru, then clicked his tongue. “If you’ve got something to complain about, come out and say it to me straight! It pisses me off when you act like that!”

Merry looked like she was about to say something, but then she looked down, glancing at her left wrist. There was a shining hexagram there. It showed that her Protection spell was still in effect.

Come to think of it, Merry’s been checking that shining hexagram every chance she gets. And, wait, her weapon’s a short staff now. What happened to the priest’s staff with the rings that she had before? Haruhiro wondered. *—No, no. Do I have time to be thinking about this? Wait, what am I supposed to be doing, again? My head’s all fuzzy. Even though I can’t imagine there’s any poison left, and Merry healed my wounds, too.*

“...Uh,” Haruhiro shook his head and blinked. “What was I going to say? Anyway... I’m sorry for messing up. For now, let’s just... Right. I know. That goblin from before. Now, I’m not saying this just because it got me, but I don’t think it’s a normal one. We’ve probably never encountered one that moves like it did. What am I trying to say is—ah... I know, yeah, that’s right, it’s dangerous to stay here. It might try sniping us with its bow and arrow again. It might bring some friends here, too. I could see that happening.”

Ranta had a sour look on his face as he nodded towards Haruhiro. “Then get on your feet already.”

“Are you okay?” Merry asked, offering him a hand.

“...Yeah.”

Haruhiro stood up. It wasn’t like he couldn’t stay on his feet, but he still felt weird somehow. He felt weak and incredibly sluggish.

“Hmm...?” Yume crouched down, and when she took a peek at Haruhiro’s face her eyes went wide. “Whuh?! Haru-kun, you’re lookin’ awfully pale!”

Shihoru looked at Haruhiro too and furrowed her brow. “She’s right.”

“It’s because he lost a lot of blood,” Merry said, supporting Haruhiro. “I’ve closed his wounds with magic, but that doesn’t bring back the blood he lost. For today, we should...”

“Hey, hey, hey, hey, heeeey,” Ranta shouted, looking up from checking the dead goblins’ bodies. A vein throbbed on his temple, and his face distorted with anger. “You’re not going to say we should go back to Alterna, are you? We haven’t earned anything yet, you know? If we go back like this, we’ll be in the red! The red, you hear me?!”

“We’ve got lots of money, y’know!” Yume shot back.

“Shut up, Yume! No matter how much money I get, it disappears in no time!”

“...Because you waste it, right?” muttered Shihoru.

“Shihoruuuu. I don’t want to hear that from someone who’s wasting her big boobs. I’ll grope you, dammit!”

Shihoru inhaled sharply, then held her breasts with both of her arms, as if hiding them. “...You’re the worst.”

“Ha ha ha ha,” Ranta laughed. “I’m not even offended!”

“Ranta, man...” Haruhiro sighed.

My head hurts. I don’t want to do anything, and I’d like nothing more than to just head back, but is that okay? Yeah, no—it’s not.

“...Sorry,” Haruhiro said. “Let me rest for now. Somewhere away from here... If I can take a break, I think I’ll get at least a little better. Can we decide what to do after that?”

“I guess that’s fine,” said Ranta. “We can do that. But, still.” Ranta pointed to him. “Let me say this, Haruhiro. This is all your fault.

You'd better realize that. Because, for all your faults, you're still our leader."

8. In an Unchanging World

In the end, after that, they killed four goblins, stripped them of all their worldly possessions, then headed back to Alterna early because Haruhiro wasn't looking so good.

Well, we needed to go to the office to fill out the paperwork anyway, is what Yume and Shihoru said to try and comfort him, but Haruhiro was still frustrated. He couldn't help but blame himself.

Even so, beating himself up over it wasn't going to help. He couldn't erase his failure, but luckily he'd survived, so it gave him material to reflect on, and he could improve how he handled things in future. In fact, he had to improve.

So, with their business taken care of, everyone headed off to Sherry's Tavern, but when they started to review how things had gone that day, things got off to a stormy start.

Ranta was the instigator.

"—I told you from the beginning, didn't I? I'll do things my way," he snapped. "I'm not geared towards being a tank anyway, so I'll have to be my own special kind of tank, right? Tanks are the ones who stand up front, so I won't see what's going on behind me. I'll have no clue what any of you guys are doing. So, it only makes sense that you should try to work with what I'm doing, right? Have I said anything wrong so far? Huh? I haven't, have I? Basically, it's weird for stupid Haruhiro to yammer on at me telling me to do this, or do that. Don't order me around. Have everyone else work around me,

dammit."

"...I get what you're saying," said Haruhiro.

"If you get what I'm saying, then do it! That's all! We're done here, right?" Ranta snapped.

"Nuh-uh, there's no way that's gonna be the end of it." Yume stood up halfway and slammed her hands on the table. "Make everyone else work around you? Are you stupid?! There's no way we can do that!"

"If you can't handle it, then quit! Just quit!" Ranta shouted.

"That's not somethin' you get to decide, Ranta!" she shot back.

"If you say you can't go along with the party's tactics, you can't blame me if I tell you you're useless!" Ranta bellowed.

"Yume's not leavin'! You leave, Ranta!"

"If I leave, you're the ones who'll be in trouble! Because I'm the core of this party now!" Ranta shouted.

"...I think that your basic assumption there is flawed," said Shihoru.

"Oh? You want to bring it, Shihoruuuu?" Ranta sneered. "You pretend to be quiet, but, really, all this time you've a been demonic beast hiding sharp fangs behind those secretly huge boobs of yours."

"I'm not hiding any fangs... and they aren't huge, I'm just fat..." Shihoru murmured.

"Then let's see 'em," Ranta smirked. "I'll give them a thorough appraisal."

"There's no way I'm showing you anything," she said coolly.

"Tch. Holding out on me, huh. You're so boring, you know that. Ugh, what a bore."

“I have no intention of trying to amuse you, Ranta-kun,” she said coldly.

“Yeah, I know,” he snapped. “I can figure out that much. Did you think those words would hurt me? My heart’s made out of steel, okay? That won’t even scratch it. Anyway, from here out, I *am* our tactics. I’m the center of everything. It all begins and ends with me. You get that? Well, you better. All of you have to study me. Become more familiar with me and change yourselves to suit me. If you do that, everything’ll work out.”

“I can’t see how it would,” Shihoru said.

“Yume agrees with Shihoru!” Yume exclaimed. “How about you, Merry-chan?”

“Huh—ah, I’m...” Merry seemed at a loss for words.

“Merry-chan, you don’t wanna go along with Ranta, right?” Yume insisted. “After all, this *is* Ranta we’re talkin’ about.”

“That’s...”

“Hmph.” Ranta put his elbows on the table, resting his head on his palms and looking off to the side peevishly. “You can say whatever you want. But, remember. I’m saying all this after having thought about what’s best for the party, too. It’s not that I just want to do whatever I feel like, or anything like that, got it? If you all disagree with me, that’s fine. But, if you’re going to, then present an alternate plan. An alternative. If you’ve got something, let’s hear it. Well, Haruhiro?”

“An alternate plan.” Haruhiro mumbled the words like an idiot, holding his porcelain mug in both of his hands. He had barely touched the mead inside it. “...Well, let’s see. An alternate plan—actually... If we make Ranta be the tank, it’s a fact that we’re going to have to accommodate him somewhat. Of course, Ranta would need to think about how he can be more tank-y and that sort of stuff. If we leave things as they are, I think we’re going to have a pretty hard

time…”

“You’re being pretty wishy-washy there, man!” Ranta said as he started to pick his nose. “It’s a bad joke if you think you can be leader like that. I mean, you did pretty terrible this afternoon, too.”

“Yeah, that was my fault,” Haruhiro said. “I already apologized, didn’t I?”

“Oho!” Ranta cried. “Are you getting angry at me? You’re getting angry at me when I should be angry at you, is that it? If you’re angry at me after what happened, you clearly haven’t learned your lesson, man.”

“…Yes, I have.”

“I dunno,” said Ranta. “I don’t see it. Not with that attitude.”

“Cut it out!” Yume shouted, puffing up her cheeks in anger. “You can’t go pumpin’ the blood to your belly! You’ve gotta think about how other people feel!”

“You moron! If you’re going to say something there, it should be ‘don’t rub salt in people’s wounds,’ obviously!” Ranta bellowed.

“Huh…?”

“Come on, how would I pump blood to my belly? That’s not even possible!” he shouted.

“M-Maybe it’s possible! If you try real hard!” Yume cried.

“Fine, do it! Do it right now! Do it right here! If you manage it, I’ll do a kowtow! I’ll do a naked dance and then kowtow for you! Hurry up and do it!” Ranta bellowed.

“Hnnngh…” Yume’s face turned bright red and it looked like steam might come out her ears.

An alternate plan… Haruhiro lifted his cup to his lips and was about

to take a sip of his mead, then he stopped. *An alternate plan. That's right. I need to think of one. An alternate plan. I mean, I don't really want to have Ranta calling the shots. But, in order to prevent that, I need to put forward a decent idea. I need to come up with fixed roles for each of my comrades. Like, at such-and-such a time, they do this, if such-and-such happens, they do that. I need to have that decided to some degree.*

When Moguzo had been with them, Haruhiro hadn't needed to focus on the details so much. Haruhiro and the others had lost Manato, gained Merry, and then slowly built up their tactics through actual combat. They had all known what they needed to do. They'd remembered it with their bodies, not their heads. It had seeped into them.

Now, most of what they had learned was of no use.

Moguzo hadn't just been a tank. Moguzo had drawn enemy attention, defended himself against their attacks, then pounded himself between them like a wedge, dealing the decisive blow. Moguzo had been the ultimate shield, but at the same time he had also been the ultimate spear. He had been pivotal to both their offense and defense.

When it came to defensive or offensive power, Moguzo had clearly been number one. No one in the party was a match for him.

In other words, Moguzo had been carrying the rest of them. Moguzo had handled so many jobs. It had been a heavy responsibility for him.

Moguzo had taken all of that on without ever whining or complaining. And so, he had grown.

"Moguzo was..." When Haruhiro spoke his name, the rest of his comrades fell silent. "He was really amazing. But, still. Moguzo was amazing to begin with, so I don't think he got stronger the regular way. No, I mean, of course I think he had an aptitude for what he did, but I don't think that was all there was to it. There's no way he

wasn't scared, but he was always the closest to the front, fighting insane enemies. And yet, Moguzo never ran away. I think he probably did it for us. As he kept doing that, Moguzo got stronger. I relied on Moguzo too much."

I should have noticed, Haruhiro thought. *Much sooner. I absolutely needed to notice it.*

It's like Ranta said. It's a bad joke to think I can be leader like this.

"I needed to lower the burden on Moguzo," Haruhiro said sadly. "There must have been things I could have done. It's too late now, though. From here on, we need to take the huge burden that Moguzo was carrying and divide it between all of us. Each of us will need the ability to do more things. I don't think our current strength is going to be enough."

"I..." Shihoru said, biting her lip once before nodding. "I think I need to learn at least one powerful spell..."

"Hmm." Yume leaned forward, resting her chin on the table. "Yume, well, it's gonna be hard, but she's gotta work on her attack power. She wants a wolf dog, too, though..."

Ranta spat out a contemptuous "Ha!" and crossed his arms. "You can say that all you want, but listen. People can't do what they can't do. They've gotta stick to what they can. A lot of dread knight skills are movement skills or attack skills meant to be used after moving, so if I stay put, I can't show my true value. It's not like I can change jobs from dread knight to warrior, either. Now that I've sworn myself to Skullhell, I have to stay a dread knight until the day I die."

"Changing jobs, huh..." Haruhiro brought a finger to his lips, glancing over to Yume.

"Meow? Is there something Yume can do?" she asked.

"No..." he murmured.

Yume's surprisingly strong, he thought. *If she tried arm wrestling, she could probably put up a good fight even against men. She has guts, too. Even though she's a hunter, she swings her machete around and crosses blades with our enemies far more often than she uses a bow and arrow. If I could just have her leave the hunters' guild and become a warrior—No, I guess I can't. Yume's attached to being a hunter, and she has her goal of getting a wolf dog, too. I think it would be wrong to force her to change just because it's convenient for the party. Besides, having seen how Moguzo fought, I'd feel kind of bad making a girl go through that. No, not kind of bad —very bad.*

She'd be scared, wouldn't she?

It's no good. I can't do that. I mean, if one of us were going to become a warrior and be the tank... Shihoru is obviously not warrior material, Merry we need to have as our priest, and Ranta can't change classes, which leaves...

"...Me?" Haruhiro said in a whisper, trying to imagine it, just in case. He imagined himself decked out in heavy armor with a helmet, swinging around The Chopper.

Wow, that looks weak, he thought.

Haruhiro himself would never want to rely on that lanky, weak-willed wussy to be the party tank.

—Weak-willed wussy, he thought. *That's right, Choco died, didn't she?*

No, forget about that. I don't have time now to dwell on it. I need to focus on us.

It all came down to the tank. Without a proper tank, they didn't stand a chance. The two roles every party needed were a tank and a healer. Taking that argument to an extreme conclusion, so long as the tank and healer were solid, the rest could do whatever they wanted.

As things stood, if someone was going to be the tank, it would have to be Ranta, who had always been the most heavily equipped after Moguzo. It was hard to imagine it now, but if he grew into the role with experience, that would be fine.

But, what are the chances of that? Haruhiro thought. *Could it work...?*

When they had lost Manato, they had brought a new healer into the party. Merry.

Was that the only option?

Haruhiro had, of course, considered the possibility. It had been in the back of his mind. But he hadn't wanted to think about it.

Haruhiro looked at Ranta, Yume, Shihoru, and finally Merry's faces. Each of the four wore a different expression, and each of them seemed to be deep in thought. They had probably all more or less considered the idea. But they didn't bring it up. None of them did.

"Um, hey," Merry said, raising her right hand a little. "Can I talk? There's something I want to tell all of you. It's something I think I need to talk about."

Haruhiro glanced to Ranta, Yume, and Shihoru. What could it be?

He felt a pain in his chest. He had a bad feeling about this. Merry was the priest, and she seemed to feel responsible for Moguzo's death. Maybe she was going to leave the party.

"S-Sure," he said, his voice trembling. "Of course. What is it?"

"I've done something I can never fix." Merry's beautiful face was frozen solid. Only her lips moved, stringing the words together in a low voice. "Back there, I let the effect of Protection wear off. I needed to recast it, but I completely forgot. In an intense battle like that, it's little things like that which mean the difference between life and death. If I had kept Protection in effect, Moguzo might not have died.

No. I'm sure he wouldn't have. It's my fault that Moguzo's dead. I let him die."

"But that's wrong!" Ranta punched the table. "You're dead wrong! Don't try to say it's all your fault. Actually, it's not just your fault! It's mine, too. He was my partner, but I couldn't fight shoulder to shoulder with him. I was weak!"

"I'm not wrong," Merry said, shaking her head slightly. "No matter how I look at it, letting Protection expire was a basic and inexcusably clumsy mistake, and Moguzo died because of it. I've let three of my comrades die before this. I never wanted to let one die again. Now, I have. I have no right to be a priest. How could I think anything else?"

"Merry-chan..." Yume said with tears in her eyes. "You can't... You can't go sayin' that! It's not about havin' the right, or whatever! Yume doesn't see it like that..."

"I can understand," Shihoru said, crossing her arms tightly and resting them on the table. "I get how you feel, Merry... It may be presumptuous for me to say that, but... I'm always feeling the same way. Wondering whether it's okay for me to be here. Wondering if I'm any use to the rest of you... wondering if I have the right to be here..."

"You don't," Ranta said with a smirk. "There's no way you would. You have no right. We were a group of misfits to begin with. From the beginning, none of us had any right to do anything. So what? Like we care. It's not our problem. We'll do it whether we have the right to or not. Isn't that how we've made it this far?"

"Ranta's right," Haruhiro said, looking at Merry.

Merry dropped her gaze to the table, seeming unwilling to meet his eyes.

She's so distant, Haruhiro thought. *Merry's right here, but she's so far away.*

“You have no right to be a priest, and you don’t need one,” said Haruhiro. “You’re our comrade. That’s good enough for us.”

“Thank you.” Merry’s lips loosened a little. It was too slight to call it a smile. Even so, Merry had tried to smile for them. “—But I’d like some time. I realized something when we went to Damuro. The way I am now, I can’t move forward with all of you. I’m scared. Too scared. I have no confidence. It doesn’t have to be long. Ten days—even seven would be fine, but give me some time.”

“Sounds fine to me,” Ranta said, shrugging, his elbows on the table. “I wanted to learn new skills anyway. Well, if I’ve got ten days, I bet I can power up a lot. Though, once the ultimate Ranta’s been born, there may not be anything left for the rest of you to do. Heh heh heh.”

“Yume ’s thinkin’ maybe she’ll learn some skills from her master, too,” Yume agreed. “She’s got the money and all.”

“I think I’ll challenge myself to learn one of the other magics, something other than Darsh Magic’s shadow magic...” Shihoru murmured.

“Okay.” Haruhiro closed his eyes.

Time.

It was time. More than anything, what they needed was time. Haruhiro and the others had never been strong enough to rush forward without stopping.

He opened his eyes.

The scenery before him hadn't changed in the slightest, to the point that it was cruel.

In this unchanging world, Haruhiro and the others would need to change themselves, little by little.

"Let's meet in front of the north gate, ten days from now at eight o'clock," he said.

9. The Coming of the Angels

Sometimes people say they feel “out of their element.”

That was exactly how Shihoru felt right now.

Close to Flower Garden Street, there was a restaurant called Maraika’s. It wasn’t like there was a sign out front, but the place was run by Maraika-san, so that was what people called it.

Maraika’s customers were about nine-tenths or, actually, more often than not, 100% women. It wasn’t that men were unwelcome, it was just that the mostly-female clientele made it harder for men to approach.

On the other hand, that made it easier for women to come in, and it was a relaxing environment for them. There weren’t many places like this, or rather, Shihoru didn’t know of any others, and the food was good, so when they were going out to eat with just the girls, Maraika’s was always their first option.

It went without saying that women who ate out frequently—mostly volunteer soldiers or those in the service industry—tended to eat at Maraika’s, so it was always packed.

Today they had avoided the busier hours, coming a little early, so there were open seats. Even so, Shihoru and Yume were forced into the corner of a large table, sitting next to one another. The food they ordered was brought out, and by the time they had half-finished eating, the restaurant was already packed.

“So, how’s it goin’ for you, Shihoru?” Yume asked. “You learnin’?”

“...Yeah,” Shihoru said hesitantly. “It took me four days to learn one spell... It’s really going to be hard to get used to... I think. I’ve only ever used Darsh magic before this, after all...”

“Darsh magic, huh,” Yume said.

“In magic, there’s what’s called mastery, you see...” Shihoru began.

“Hmm? Mustardy?”

“...Uh, no. Mas-ter-y.”

“Ohh,” Yume said. “You meant mastery, huh. Mastery, right. What’s that?”

“For a mage, their magical power is drawn from elementals,” Shihoru said. “They’re a sort of magical creature, just so you know, and there are four types...” Shihoru counted them on her fingers. “Arve, Kanon, Falz, and Darsh.”

“Amp, and Maroon, and Fax, and Dash? Mm-hmm,” Yume said. “That’s hard to remember.”

“...Anyway, there are four types of elementals. The knowledge about each of them... the techniques to properly control them... and the experience you gain from doing so, all of that goes into what we call mastery. Each type of elementals has its own quirks. There are some similarities, but other things are completely different...”

“So, then, are there four masteries, or somethin’ like that?” Yume asked.

“That’s right,” said Shihoru. “For instance... the mastery for Arve and Darsh are separate. For me... I’ve been using Darsh all this time, so I have some mastery built up. But it doesn’t carry over to other magics, so it’s like starting from scratch...”

“Ohhh,” Yume said. “Sounds tough. Yume, she’s a hunter, so there’re only so many options for her. There’s her bow, her machete, and then, what, huntin’ skills? That’s all. Huh? Wow, that’s three whole things. But Yume, she’s not got any huntin’ skills, y’know.”

“...Does keeping a wolf dog fall under hunting skills?” Shihoru asked.

“Yep. But, y’know, Yume’s thinkin’ she may have to give up on it. Yume’s got the money, but if she wants to raise one, it has to be from when it’s a puppy. She’d want to take proper care of it, y’know? It’s possible to leave it with someone else, but Yume doesn’t really want to have to do that.”

“In our current situation, it might be hard for you to give a puppy all the attention it needs...” Shihoru agreed.

“Yeah, Yume was thinkin’ that, too. Even if Yume were able to raise it, she’d feel bad for the poor thing.”

“It’s not easy taking care of an animal...”

“That’s right,” Yume said. “It takes... determination, maybe? So, anyway, if you train a wolf dog well, it’ll never betray its master. It’ll defend its master to the death.”

“...I wish I had someone like that,” said Shihoru.

“Hoh? Shihoru, you’d rather have a pet person than a pet dog?”

“Huh...? Oh, no, I didn’t mean it like that...”

Shihoru used her fork to push around what little food was left on her plate. Yume was kind of dense when it came to this stuff, or just completely uninterested, so sometimes she didn’t quite get what Shihoru was talking about.

When she looked at Yume, Shihoru sometimes worried that she herself was abnormal. She couldn’t help but divide people of the other

gender into two groups: those she could fall in love with, and those she couldn't. Shihoru felt a little disgusted by that part of herself. She wished she could be more ignorant of it, like Yume.

When I do decide I like a boy, it only brings me suffering, she thought sadly. *I'm better off never falling in love.*

"Hey, you two," someone said.

Shihoru hadn't expected anyone to call out to them, so she was really surprised. She turned to look towards the voice. She knew—no, that was a bit too strong of a word for it—she recognized the speaker's face, or rather, the way she was dressed. She was a muscular woman with a white feathered stole wrapped around her neck and her hair tied back with a bandana that, naturally, was also decorated with white feathers.

"The name's Kikuno, but I guess you wouldn't know that," the woman said. "We've never really been introduced before. Still, I know about you two. We fought together at Deadhead, yeah?"

"Ahh!" Yume pointed at Kikuno. "You're one of those Wily Angels, aren't you?"

"...It's the Wild Angels," Kikuno said. "And don't point at people. It's rude."

"Yikes. S-Sorry. Yume'll be more careful about that from here on."

"You do that," said Kikuno. "I'm pretty forgiving, but a lot of people are more temperamental. Well, not that that matters. —Kajiko!"

Kikuno turned around and started waving. Was she trying to call someone over? No, not just someone.

"Whoa-ho!" Yume let out a weird cry.

Shihoru's entire body froze up, and she could only stare at the tall woman walking towards them with huge strides.

“Sorry, would you mind giving us your seats?” Kikuno asked, chasing off three of the female customers who were sitting across from Shihoru and Yume.

Kikuno and the tall, frightening beauty sat down in their now-vacant seats.

The frightening beauty. Truly, Kajiko was frightening. Frighteningly beautiful, and just plain frightening. Just being seated across from her like this was intimidating. Honestly, Shihoru wanted to run away. But she couldn’t. If she took off running, she was sure she’d be cut down. Even Yume, always so carefree, was quiet as a mouse.

“I’d say ‘long time no see,’ but it hasn’t actually been that long.” When Kajiko smiled, Shihoru felt like a cold blade was being pressed up against her heart. “I’m Kajiko, head of the Wild Angels. It’s Shihoru and Yume, right?”

Shihoru nodded silently and mechanically, like a puppet.

“...Huh?” Yume cocked her head to the side. “Why do you know Yume and Shihoru’s names?”

“I look into any girl who catches my interest.” Kajiko off-handedly said something very frightening. “That warrior of yours, he had guts, for a man. My condolences for your loss.”

Shihoru bit her lip. Why? It was strange. Though she hadn’t been sad about it like her comrades, and couldn’t even cry for him, now, when she heard Kajiko praising Moguzo, her heart was suddenly swept with emotions. Happiness, pride, and loneliness.

At last, it finally hit her that she had lost a wonderful and irreplaceable comrade.

“...Moguzo sure was strong, wasn’t he?” Yume mumbled, looking down.

"I thought he was," Kajiko said, looking off into the distance for a moment. "You're still inexperienced. You're practically rookies. You have a lot of room for growth. If that warrior had been allowed to keep growing steadily, he might have made a name for himself. At the very least, I'm sure he'd have grown enough to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with that show-off who joined up at the same time as you."

"...With Renji-kun..." Shihoru ground her teeth. Kajiko probably wasn't one for flattering others. She could tell that much. This was the honest appraisal of the person running a major clan like the Wild Angels. She could trust it.

Moguzo had been strong. He could have gotten stronger. Much stronger.

"Well, it happens all the time," Kajiko said with a shrug. "It's not unusual for someone with budding talent to die before it can bloom. Actually, the more talent a person has, the more likely they are to die early. Those who are weak and timid don't try to bear the brunt of things in a fight. That's how they survive. I was the same way."

Kikuno looked at her and rolled her eyes. "...No you weren't, Kajiko."

"Nah," Kajiko said. "You girls have too high an opinion of me. True, I'm not average. I'm no match for Soma or Kemuri, but I doubt I'd lose to 'Red Devil' Ducky, 'One-on-One' Max, or Shinohara. But it's not like it was always that way. I was pretty pitiful back when I first got my start as a volunteer soldier. It was just that, thanks to my looks, there was no shortage of stupid men who would try to protect me. I used them to survive. Honestly, it makes me sick to my stomach. But the facts are the facts. I used those stupid, vulgar, scummy men as stepping stones to get stronger, little by little. Of course, I'm not going to claim I didn't have raw potential. I must have. It's just, everyone has that. At something. What's important is not dying. You need to live, no matter what it takes, feed on anything you can, and build your own abilities. Shihoru. Yume."

"...Y-Yes?" Shihoru stuttered.

"Meow?" Yume asked.

"You've lost that warrior," Kajiko said. "He must have been the central pillar of your party. Even at a moderate estimate, your party's lost at least half of its strength. You can't survive like this."

Shihoru tried to gulp, but her mouth was dry, without so much as a drop of spit for her to swallow. When she turned to look at Yume next to her, Yume's eyes were open wide and her lips were pursed.

"You two have a lot going for you," Kajiko said, softening her expression a little. "Zoran Zesh was a powerful enemy. The orcs are a powerful race, but, to be frank, not many individual orcs get that strong. About the only people who could have taken him one-on-one were Soma and Kemuri, I'd say. Looking at your history before that, it wouldn't have been surprising if you had all died. And yet, you're still here. That's impressive. However, unfortunately, your party is finished. You can't fight without that warrior. It won't take long before another of you dies. Once one of you dies, it'll be a second, then a third. That's usually how these things go. If that warrior had survived, your party would've been one to watch, I'm sure. Considering the other well-known party that joined up at the same time as you, people might have started talking about you all as a golden generation. But that possibility is gone now. If you cling to that party forever, Shihoru, Yume, the only thing waiting for you will be a miserable death."

"...You're saying... we should drop out... then?" Shihoru asked, her voice trembling, to which Kajiko immediately responded, "I am," with a nod.

"Join the Wild Angels," Kajiko continued. "I won't insist you decide right this second, but you're welcome to. I have a party that could take in a mage and a hunter as soon as tomorrow."

"We're an all-female clan," Kikuno added with a strangely friendly smile. "There's not one filthy guy allowed. Nobody will use you. We've

banded together to improve ourselves, to survive, and to enjoy life. Men are banned, but not having them around has never caused us any problems. Actually, you know what? We're better off without any stupid men around. No matter how hard they try to keep up appearances, when it comes down to it, they're all the same. They only see us as an outlet for their filthy lust."

"Kikuno, you're getting a little too fired up," Kajiko said.

"Ah, sorry, Kajiko. I got carried away..."

"It's true that men are banned, but that's only from joining the clan," Kajiko said. "What you do on your own time is none of my business. However, if anyone hurts one of my comrades, I'll never forgive them. They can run and hide, but I will find them and make them pay. It would take a real idiot to not realize that, so nobody makes a move on one of our girls half-heartedly. If there's a man who's still willing to approach you despite that, you can be sure he's serious. I won't beat a man like that half to death, so you don't have to worry."

"I dunno..." Kikuno said.

"If you've got something to say, Kikuno, look me in the eye and say it," Kajiko said sharply.

"N-Never mind."

Death, Shihoru thought. *A miserable death. At this rate, we're going to die.*

Shihoru looked down and closed her eyes. *—Manato-kun. Moguzo-kun.*

She remembered the looks on their faces as they'd died. Were Shihoru and the others going to end up like that...? No, not necessarily. Kajiko was inviting them to join the Wild Angels. Was she exaggerating the situation in order to get them to? That had to be it.

But, the fact was, the party's strength had been cut in half. Even if Shihoru learned new magic and Yume picked up new skills, they couldn't fill in the hole left by Moguzo. Without Moguzo, would they be able to make it through difficult battles like the one at Deadhead Watching Keep?

Shihoru was always at the rear of the party, watching over them. She could answer that question with certainty. They could not. When she imagined not seeing Moguzo's large back in front of her, the scene looked so hopelessly empty.

As a mage, she didn't wear anything fit to be called armor, so she felt naked standing on a battlefield without Moguzo. She felt uncertain, frightened, and wanted to run away. Everyone knew their situation was hopeless, and they were desperately trying to do something about it. They were trying to walk a thorny path.

If they joined the Wild Angels, Shihoru and Yume wouldn't have to walk that path anymore.

Shihoru opened her eyes, looking to see Yume's expression.

Yume would probably decline right here. "Sorry, it's kind of you to invite us, though," she'd say. When she did, Shihoru would probably come to the same conclusion. That was what she thought. However, Yume...

Yume furrowed her brow and stuck her lips out like an octopus.

She was thinking. She didn't seem to know what to do. Even Yume was at a loss for what to do.

"Um..." Shihoru bowed her head. She didn't even know who it was she was trying to be apologetic to. "...Give us some time to think about it."

10. Those Who Remain and Those Who Are Left Behind

"Oh, man..." Haruhiro groaned, rolling over in bed. Just changing his position was enough to cause unbearable pain all over his body. "I'm gonna die..."

After mumbling those words, *No, no, no!* he rejected them. *I shouldn't use that expression so lightly. But, still, it really hurts.*

"...You're a real ogre, Barbara-sensei," he moaned. "Not that I didn't already know that..."

There was a skill called Assault. It was one of the thief fighting skills. The name made it sound strong, but as for the kind of skill it was, well, it was a desperate attack.

You accepted being hit by any counterattack in return for landing a combo on the enemy. You didn't even consider defense or evasion. You just attacked, attacked, and attacked some more.

It wasn't just a matter of swinging wildly, though. You used weapons efficiently, creating as little of a gap between attacks as possible. Instead of taking defensive or evasive actions, you reduced the risk of a counterattack by keeping up a relentless assault.

If there was a counterattack, there was nothing left that you could do. You'd have to graciously accept death. You had to kill before being killed. It was a manly skill.

Haruhiro was resting his exhausted and hurt body in the top bunk of his bed back in a dimly lit room at the volunteer soldier lodging house. The new equipment he had bought, a new, good quality dagger and a bludgeoning weapon called a sap, were lying at his side.

The sap was a short club made of a flexible material, about 30 centimeters long, with the end of it being heavier. The whole thing was wrapped in leather cord, the end of which would wrap around the user's hand.

Haruhiro had prepared the new dagger and sap to use while learning Assault. In other words, to power himself up, Haruhiro had chosen to learn Assault and adopt a dual wielding style.

Haruhiro was, of course, not ambidextrous. He was right-handed. It wasn't simple to use a weapon in his left hand. When you factored in that he would be using a weapon in both hands, it became even more difficult.

Barbara-sensei had told him to just get used to it. *It should be natural for you to hold your weapons the entire time you're awake, and I want you holding them while you're asleep, too,* she had said.

Haruhiro held his dagger and sap. Holding his weapons around the clock was too much, but he tried to touch them like this whenever he had time.

The six days he had spent learning Assault had been as punishing as they always were. For the first two days, he had just spent a lot of time experiencing Barbara-sensei's Assault first hand. For the two days after that, he had practiced the patterns for Assault basically without sleep or rest. For the last two days, he had sparred with Barbara-sensei—ultimately, Haruhiro had never successfully hit Barbara-sensei with Assault, but she'd hit him with her wooden swords more times than he could count. He had fainted several times and had to be healed by a priest that Barbara-sensei called in.

So, technically, I'm unharmed, Haruhiro thought. *Or, rather, I've healed. My body still hurts all over, though. That, and it feels heavy.*

This goes way beyond just feeling sluggish.

"Ranta's not back..." he murmured.

Shihoru and Yume aren't at the lodging house, either. They had both left to learn new magic and skills. Is that what Ranta's doing, too?

Haruhiro suspected Ranta was off goofing around, but apparently he wasn't.

Haruhiro had plans to go to the thieves' guild again tomorrow to learn another skill, but with his body in this state, was he going to be able to do it?

I'm not convinced, he started to think...

"...but that's not something I can afford to be saying, huh," he finished aloud.

My body feels horribly sluggish, but I'm hungry. I should eat something before I go to sleep.

Haruhiro willed himself to get up, sheathing his dagger and fastening his sap to his belt.

As soon as he got down from the bed, he quickly drew his dagger and sap and fell into a combat stance.

"...Too slow," he said.

This isn't good enough, he thought. He put away his dagger and sap once more, then drew them. He tried it several times, but it just wasn't feeling right.

"Aww... Well, I guess it's fine. No use rushing it..."

You don't have enough spirit, Barbara-sensei had scolded him many times.

Vigor. Spirit. Backbone.

I know that, though, Haruhiro thought. *Even if I want to change, even if I try to change, it's not that easy. I want to, though. To be more... positive? Always bright and energetic. The kind of guy who can drag everyone along with him. But to still be cautious, and be able to get going when the going gets tough, that's the kind of leader I want to be.*

"...But I'm just an Old Cat, after all."

Choco's trade name was Cheeky Cat.

When Haruhiro suddenly recalled that, he felt like he had to sit down.

What good is sitting down going to do? he wondered bitterly. *Choco's gone. We might have been able to become close, but any hope of that is completely cut off now. Dwelling on it won't do me any good, but I can't help but think about it occasionally.*

"I need to stop..." Haruhiro put away his dagger and sap.

Food. It's time for food. I should eat. If he got something good to eat, he was sure that would cheer him up.

The moment before he stepped out of the room, he sensed a presence.

There was something out in the corridor.

Ranta? No, if it was Ranta, he'd come in. Shihoru or Yume? If it was them, they'd at least call out. Merry would do the same, so who is it, then? This is creepy. There's no such thing as being too careful. It could be a thief. Not likely, though.

He used Sneaking to kill his footsteps as he approached the door. *Now what?*

He decided in an instant. He drew his dagger in his right hand and opened the door with his left. The guy was standing right on the other side of the door. He was pretty tall. Haruhiro jabbed his elbow into the guy's solar plexus.

"Gah...!"

Without missing a beat, Haruhiro circled around behind him, and was about to stab the man in the neck, when—*Wait, I know this guy*.

"...Huh? You're alive?" Haruhiro asked.

"Ow..." The man was holding his belly with one hand and grimacing, but there was no doubt about who it was.

It's Mr. Tall, Haruhiro thought. *From Choco's party. A ghost...?*

No, that's not it. It can't be. I thought he died at Deadhead Watching Keep. I was sure Choco's entire party were wiped out. Was I wrong?

"...Well, sorry for being alive," the tall guy muttered.

"No—it's nothing to apologize for... but... uhh, what about the others...?"

"There's no one but me left," Mr. Tall said, taking a deep breath. "And I was sure I was going to get killed just now."

"W-Well, that's what happens when you just stand there like that," Haruhiro said. "You can't blame me for thinking you were suspicious."

"Is that how it works?" the guy asked.

"That's how it works."

"I'll be more careful from now on."

"That'd be a good idea," Haruhiro said. "Well, anyway, I've gotta

get going."

"Ah."

"Huh?" Haruhiro responded.

"...Wait, I wanted to talk."

"To me?" Haruhiro asked.

"Well, like, you and I are the only ones here, pal."

"Well, yeah, but—huh? What? What'd you want to talk to me about?"

"Well... I wonder," Mr. Tall scratched his head. "Uh... can I ask for advice?"

"Huh?"

"Can't I?" the guy asked.

"Well, I mean—"

Sure, I'm his senior and all, but we've never really talked before, Haruhiro thought. *I don't feel like starting now, either. I mean, I do feel sorry for the guy, but still.*

Choco's party had had six people in it. Mr. Tall had lost five comrades all at once, and he'd been left all alone. What had happened to him after that? Haruhiro didn't know, but if the guy was coming to him for help, he probably wasn't having a grand old time with a new group of comrades.

"...We can talk a bit while we eat, if that's fine," said Haruhiro.

"That'll do."

"Okay," Haruhiro said. "It'll be my treat."

I have to question why I'm trying to play the good senior here, but a little sympathy for the guy probably won't hurt me, he thought. *I mean, I know what he must be going through.*

The food stall village near the craftsmen's town was close to the lodging house, so they decided to look for something there. For the moment, soruzo was off the menu for Haruhiro. He might never eat it again.

They went to a stall with every variety of fried meat and vegetable skewer imaginable and ate a bunch of them. Mr. Tall just ate the hot skewers Haruhiro offered him, not trying to say anything.

"Well, that's fine," Haruhiro said. "Wait, no, it's not. Didn't you have something to ask me about?"

"Ohhh," the tall guy said. "Yeah, I guess."

Haruhiro might not be one to talk, but he thought Mr. Tall was awfully brusque. He seemed intensely indifferent and cynical. He stood over 170 centimeters tall, but his posture was awful.

"But, you know, I've got something to ask," the tall guy said awkwardly.

"Sure."

"A favor, you could say."

Haruhiro was startled. "From me? A favor? Huh? What...?"

"It's really hard to say this," the tall guy said uncomfortably.

"Dragging it out won't help..."

"Guess not."

"It may be rude to say it," Haruhiro said, "but you're kind of a pain, you know that?"

“Kuzaku,” the guy said.

“Your name?” Haruhiro asked.

“Yeah. My name. You’re Haruhiro-kun, yeah?”

“Well... yeah, I am,” Haruhiro said.

He’s talking to me casually now? Well, it’s fine. I really don’t care.

Haruhiro was definitely Mr. Tall, or Kuzaku’s, senior, but it wasn’t like he’d had a year or two more experience than him as a volunteer soldier, and of the two of them, Haruhiro probably looked younger. Besides, he didn’t like being overly formal.

“You can drop the -kun,” said Haruhiro. “So, what’s this request?”

“It’s about the party,” said Kuzaku.

“Okay. Whose?”

“Yours, Haruhiro-kun... no, Haruhiro.”

“Mine?” Haruhiro asked.

“I mean, I’m alone now.”

“I see.”

“I’ve been thinking I need to join up with some group,” explained Kuzaku. “Gotta keep myself fed and all.”

“You’re not going to get anywhere without an income, yeah,” agreed Haruhiro.

“But, I dunno... Somehow, it feels wrong.”

“What does?” Haruhiro asked.

“Isn’t it a little tough?” the guy asked. “I just lost five comrades and

was left all alone. It's like, can I get along with people who've never experienced that?"

"You think they wouldn't understand how you feel?" Haruhiro asked.

"Hmm... Yeah. Ahh. Not quite. But, it's the same, I guess. Ah..." Kuzaku held his jaw and let his tongue hang out of his mouth. "My jaw's exhausted. Haven't talked this long in a while."

Like that's my problem, Haruhiro thought. *This isn't going to work. I can't see myself getting along with Kuzaku. Why? Something's bugging me. —That's it.*

Back then, Kuzaku had been fighting an orc, his back to the wall as he'd tried to protect Choco. But he hadn't been able to protect her. Kuzaku had been taken down by the orc, and then Choco had been killed.

Haruhiro sympathized with Kuzaku's situation. *But, buddy, you failed to protect Choco, you know? And despite that, you're still alive while Choco's dead. What's with that?*

It wasn't that Haruhiro thought that in any clear way. Still, there was something that rubbed him the wrong way. That was probably it. Choco was dead, but Kuzaku was alive.

Kuzaku may well have done his best. Kuzaku might have been more miserable than any of them about what happened. There might not have been anything Kuzaku could have done, but Haruhiro couldn't deny that he felt some antipathy towards him.

"What have you been doing?" Haruhiro asked. "Since then."

"Learning skills, that sort of thing," said the tall man. "I had some money. My inheritance, you could say." Kuzaku pulled on his earlobe, a slight, forced smile on his face. "Other than that, I've been doing a lot of thinking,"

“And so, you want to join my party?” Haruhiro asked.

“Yeah. Basically.”

“Are you a warrior?” Haruhiro asked.

“No, a paladin.”

“My party’s lost Moguzo, our tank, so you’re thinking you’ll take his place?” Haruhiro asked.

“I’m not thinking that.” Kuzaku looked offended. “I don’t think I could, either. You guys are my seniors. You’re on a different level. In terms of experience, and stuff.”

“We do want a tank, though,” Haruhiro admitted. “Honestly—”

When he’d been at the thieves’ guild being put through the wringer by Barbara-sensei, that was the one thing he’d kept thinking during his rare breaks. That, really, they were going to need a tank, after all. That there might be no choice but to find a warrior or paladin to join the party.

Haruhiro shook his head and sighed. “But... This is just my thoughts on the matter, but it’s too soon. We haven’t come to terms with it yet. Besides, it’s not something I can decide on my own. I can’t give you the response you want. Sorry.”

“I see.” Kuzaku bowed his head a little. “I’m sorry, too.”

It’s not that it doesn’t pain me to do this, Haruhiro thought. *But, honestly, I never want to see Kuzaku again.*

Moguzo’s gone.

What a serious, serious blow that is.

11. Egoist

"Gwahahaha!" Ranta guffawed loudly.

It felt like the first time in a long time that he'd seen the light of day. Actually, it had been a long time. The dread knights' guild was underground in the sprawling slums of Alterna's West Town. Ranta had stayed there for a while to learn two skills. For nine days, he hadn't set foot outside of that dank, jail-like guild. No, it wasn't just jail-*like*. He couldn't have left if he'd wanted to. If he'd insisted on leaving, he would have left as a corpse. On that point, at least, it *was* a jail.

The sun should have warmed Ranta's body, but instead he shivered.

"...Damn, I know I say this every time, but the lords were scary..."

Within the dread knights' guild, there were a number of dread knights with the position of lord. He didn't know the precise number, but Ranta had probably met seven of them.

Why "probably"? Because the lords hid their faces, and they never gave their names. He could only distinguish them by their voices and height. That meant there were seven that Ranta could tell apart.

Every last one of them was damn scary. They didn't show even a hint of kindness, and they were way too merciless. To be blunt, Ranta couldn't see the lords as fellow humans. If people mastered the way of the dread knight, did they turn out like that?

"They're damn cool, though," Ranta said. "I wanna be like that.

Lord Ranta, huh. Heh heh…”

Ranta held his throat, coughing to clear it, then tried imitating their voices.

“‘Call me Lord. You are Lord Skullhell’s slave, and I am Lord Skullhell’s slave who will show you the way. There is no need for names for either of us.’ …Oh-ho! That was cool! Was that cool or what, just now? It was so damn cool! Ow!”

Ranta was whacked in the back of the head, but when he turned to look, there was no one there.

What? Did I imagine it? I couldn’t have, right…? He rubbed the spot where he’d been hit, turned back to face forward, and there was a black-clad lord looking like a hazy shadow as they walked away.

“Urkh… W-Was I overheard?!” Ranta yelped.

“Foolish slave.” The lord stopped, turning the face covered in a reddish black mask to face him. “Will you be embraced by Lord Skullhell?”

“N-No!” Ranta gasped. “I’m good, thanks!”

“What do you mean, you’re *good*?” the lord demanded.

“Erm, well, I’m good for now, like, I still want to serve Lord Skullhell and, like, I can serve him, like, I’m gonna serve him real good!” Ranta blathered. “I think I can be way, way more useful than I am now, so, uh, l-l-let me go for now! I-I’m begging you!”

Ranta jumped into the air and threw himself on the ground. He ground his forehead against the floor. It was a magnificent kowtow.

“I-I screwed up! I-I was wrong! I’m gonna work myself like a horse, to the bone, with total sincerity, to do the will of Lord Skullhell, so, please! Please, please, please, this once! S-Spare my life, at least!”

"You scum." The lord left, leaving only those words behind.

Ranta stood up, and—"Whew!"—wiped the cold sweat off his face.

"...Th-That was close. S-Still, you know, wasn't that the first time I've met a lord outside? So the lords go outside like regular people, huh? Well, yeah, of course. They can't stay underground all the time. Hell, if she took off that mask, I wouldn't even know who she was. I could meet her at the bar and never realize it. That lord must've been a woman. I mean, she had tits. I only know the one female lord, so that must have been her, yeah? Maybe she's actually hot when she takes off that mask. A total femme fatale, huh. I could go for that... Geh heh heh..."

As he wandered through the twisted streets of West Town, Ranta fantasized about the days of love and lust that would unfold between the two of them once he was finally a lord. The dread knights' guild forced him into a life of abstinence, so when he got out, he was always pent up.

"I'm a healthy young man, after all," Ranta said. "You can't blame me. Yeah."

Ranta stood in front of Celestial Alley, looking up into the sky. The sun had seemed so bright and warm when he'd first come out, but now it was already evening. The sun was low on the horizon.

"—I'm gonna live your share as well, partner," he said. "I mean, I'd rather you were here to live it with me. But I'm fine without you. That's 'cause my legend as the strongest is just getting started. You just sit back and watch me, you idiot..."

Ranta rubbed his eyes and sniffed his nose. He put his hands on his hips, puffing out his chest and laughing loudly. He felt invincible when he did that. No, he didn't just feel it—he *was* invincible.

Ranta took a leisurely detour down Celestial Alley. He wasn't going to silly old Sherry's Tavern tonight. No, he'd decided on a place with lots of pretty girls to pour his drinks for him. If things went well, he'd

take one or two of them home with him, then take things all the way to the finish.

"Yeah, the way I am now... I can do it!" Ranta thrust his hips in the air, then looked around for a place.

The good places were reserved for the regular forces of the Frontier Army, with no volunteer soldiers allowed, so he had to be careful in his choice. Ranta wanted a place that looked like it'd have lots of young, busty girls with an hourglass figure who were kind and considerate, but who'd become bold once they were alone with him and take the lead.

Ranta walked up and down Celestial Alley a few times before stopping outside one establishment.

The cabaret club, Runrun Paradise.

The exterior looked a bit out of place, but there were girls on the second floor balcony dressed in outfits which left nothing to the imagination. They were shooting intense looks at the passing men and waving to them to come in. Of course, Ranta was being invited, too.

No, Ranta was specifically being invited.

"Heh heh heh... I'm pumped to the max!" he hollered.

Doing everything he could to keep his boiling blood under control, Ranta went to dash through the door to Runrun Paradise.

Then someone grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Hey, Curly."

"Huh...?!" Ranta yelped.

This was what it felt like to have a bucket of cold water poured on you.

Ranta turned around, ready to visit three thousand punches and seven thousand kicks on the audacious bastard who'd dared touch his shoulder, but when he saw that face, he had an immediate change of heart, throwing himself to the ground and performing a kowtow. It was his second jumping kowtow that day, but considering who he was dealing with, he couldn't afford to be embarrassed about that.

"I-I-I-I'm sorry...! Wait, did I even do anything?! I must've, huh, 'cause we wouldn't be doing this if I hadn't! Anyway, I'm seriously, seriously sorry!"

"...What are you apologizing for?" Renji asked.

"Well, I don't really know why I'm apologizing!" Ranta cried. "...Huh? Is that not it? I don't need to apologize...? Wait, what're you doing here, Renji? No, not Renji, Renji-san! Maybe you're going to Runrun Paradise, too? No, not just going there, but you're a regular...?"

"Runrun Paradise?" When Renji looked up to the second floor balcony, the girls squealed and shrieked.

That wasn't all—Ranta saw it. He witnessed it. One of the girls pulled back the already-revealing chest portion of her dress, giving him a peek of her killer boobs. Her makeup was a bit heavy, but she was a pretty girl, and the way Renji didn't bat an eye at it, just calmly denying it with a "No," was seriously manly.

"I've never been in this place," Renji said.

"...Y-Yeah, I guess you wouldn't have been," said Ranta. "Huh? Then, why did you...?"

"I happened to see you, so I called out to you," Renji said.

"Huh?! N-No, I mean, why would you be talking to me?" Ranta asked.

"I've been wanting to talk to you."

“T-To me...?!” Ranta asked.

“Yeah.” Renji patted down his ash gray hair, sighing. “I’m not that interested anymore, though.”

“...Because of Runrun Paradise?”

“No. Because of how you act.”

“Oh, *of course*.” Ranta stood up with an awkward laugh, quickly giving himself the sniff test to make sure he didn’t stink.

No, wait. He’s not a girl. He’s a dude. Like, the dude to end all dudes. I don’t need to do this. Or rather, he makes me a million times more nervous than any girl.

“Uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uh, uhmm... Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What did you want to talk about?” Ranta stuttered.

“Come with me.” Renji pointed the way with his chin, then started to walk.

Ranta cried, “Yes, sir!” and took off after him.

Renji took Ranta to a small, cramped bar on the edge of Celestial Alley. It was truly cramped, but the interior was neat, with a good stock of bottles and casks of wine behind the bar. There were no other customers. It was probably too early for that. Later in the night, people would gather here to enjoy a quiet drink. That was the kind of place this had to be. In other words, it was no place for Ranta.

“Th-This is a good place,” said Ranta. “Ha ha ha, ha...”

“Brandy, any kind, for two,” Renji ordered without asking Ranta. Their drinks were ready quickly. There was a brown-ish liquid in a short glass.

Ranta said, “Don’t mind if I do!” and took a swig. He nearly choked on the stuff, but he somehow managed to endure. “Th-This stuff is

strong…”

Renji gave a low snort, then downed his glass in one shot.

—Whoa. Damn, he’s cool…

“How’s it going?” Renji asked.

“Huh? Oh… Well, so-so… you could say. You know what happened to us.”

“Moguzo, huh,” said Renji.

“Well, that’s how it is…”

“I misjudged him,” Renji said. “He was a big deal.”

Renji’s meaning wasn’t clear. Moguzo had been big? What did he mean by that? That he’d been stronger than he’d thought? Or that it was a big deal that Moguzo had died, or something like that? Either way, Renji was acknowledging Moguzo.

—Man, you’ve got Renji acknowledging you now, partner, Ranta thought proudly. *Not that being recognized after your death does you much good, though.*

“But, well, he’s gone now,” Ranta said. “It’s not going to do us any good to moan and complain about it. We’ve got to get by on our own now. That’s how we’re taking it…”

“What about Haruhiro?” asked Renji.

“What about him? There’s not much to say,” Ranta said. “Well, he’s trying hard in his own way. Not that he’s much of a leader.”

“True enough.”

“He can’t be like you, Renji-san,” Ranta added.

“Cut it out with the -san.”

“Righto. Renji it is.” Ranta took a little sip of his brandy. “This is good stuff, if you take it a bit at a time. Still, it’s strange to be here, talking to you like this. You alone?”

“Work is work,” said Renji.

“And you wanna keep it separate from your time off?”

“Yeah, kinda,” said Renji.

“If you’re with people all the time, they get annoying,” Ranta agreed. “You wanna be alone once in a while.”

“Even you feel like that?” Renji asked archly.

“I’m fine all by myself, y’know?” Ranta said. “I don’t really get lonely. In this business, you can’t go it alone, though, so I need comrades. A group.”

“Want to join mine?” Renji asked.

Ranta nearly nodded, and then—*Hold on, wait,* he thought. *What?*

What did Renji just say? “Want to join mine?” No. That can’t be it, right? “Want a jumbo lime?” No, that’s not it.

“Want to join mine?” That was what Renji had said.

“...Huh?” Ranta asked, dumbfounded.

“Right now, we’ve got five,” said Renji. “There’s room for one more.”

“Oh—because Protection works on up to six, right?” Ranta asked.

“Thieves won’t work on another thief’s turf,” said Renji. “It’s part of their code of honor. I don’t need a hunter who can’t use a bow or a mage with no firepower, either. Your priest is worthless, too. She let Moguzo die.”

“That’s not...!” He felt the blood rushing to his head. But... why should Ranta have to stick up for Merry? Because she was his comrade? Even if she was, he had to call a spade a spade. That was Ranta’s stance. He didn’t want to play at being friends.

“...Well, yeah,” said Ranta. “Her skills aren’t bad, but Merry screwed up. She screwed up royally.”

“Our Chibi may not look it, but she’s useful,” said Renji.

“That seriously, seriously shocked me,” said Ranta. “I dunno... she just didn’t look like she’d have it in her. But if she’s supporting your party, she must be amazing.”

“Ranta.” That was probably a first. Renji hadn’t called him Curly, he’d called him by name. “You’re going to become useful. When I saw you at Deadhead, that’s what I thought. But Haruhiro can’t use you properly.”

Renji had been watching?

Ranta had seen Renji and his group. Renji was the one in it who was really, really incredible. Still, that was just because Renji was a crazy man who’d jump into danger like it was nothing and mow down enemies. Ron and the others were plenty amazing themselves. They had been with Renji all this time, and lived. That was special in and of itself. It was hard to believe that they hadn’t been volunteer soldiers for any longer than Ranta and the others.

Him, in that party.

If that were to happen—he was sure he could fight much, much harder. Without having to worry about his comrades, he’d be able to use his skills left and right to keep the enemies at his mercy. That was how a dread knight was meant to fight. Not how he was now. He had to worry about all sorts of stuff. There were too many limitations. If only they still had Moguzo.

If his partner were there, he could have focused on fighting like a

dread knight. Of course, that wasn't possible anymore. If he considered the party, Ranta had no choice but to become the tank. He wasn't suited for it, but he could do it. Ranta meant to come up with his own ways of doing it, too. Even if that meant having to kill who he really was, he had no choice.

Is there really no other choice...? he wondered.

"I'm a selfish guy," Renji said, downing his second glass of brandy in one gulp. "I take care of those who can be useful to me. I don't care about anyone else. In the end, I think most people are the same. If you live for others, it just means you die for them, too."

"Yeah, I get that a lot," Ranta said. "They say I'm selfish and egotistical."

"Let them."

"You think I can get strong?" Ranta asked.

"If I'm the one using you," said Renji.

"You want me to be your pawn, is that it?"

"Bingo."

Renji wasn't lying. At the very least, he thought Ranta had potential. He was trying to poach him. For Team Renji.

Seriously? Ranta thought. *I'm going to crack up laughing. This is amazing. Is luck finally on my side? So, what do I do? With an offer like this, I don't even need to ask that, do I? The answer is obvious. Right?*

12. Today More than Yesterday, Tomorrow More than Today

"Man..." Haruhiro muttered.

How long had it been since the eight o'clock bell chimed? Five minutes? Ten? Haruhiro didn't have anything expensive like a pocket watch, so he didn't know.

"They just aren't showing up, huh..." he went on.

"They aren't..." For a while now, Merry had been standing next to Haruhiro, restlessly poking at the ground with her short staff.

Haruhiro had probably arrived at the north gate at around half past seven. It looked like Ranta had come back to the lodging house late last night. When he'd tried to drag him out of bed, Ranta had said to go ahead without him. He hadn't gone to call Shihoru and Yume. He hadn't thought it was necessary.

He had woken up fairly early in the morning and, with nothing better to do, Haruhiro had decided to leave the lodging house early.

Merry had shown up at the north gate around ten minutes after Haruhiro. Of course, he had been relieved to see her.

Thank goodness, he'd thought, from the bottom of his heart.

Merry had learned Sacrament. It was a top-class light magic spell that healed serious wounds in an instant, and it could have been

considered mandatory for any priest of mid-tier or higher.

Merry could still only use it around twice per day, but Sacrament was sure to be a great boon to the party. If it came to it, they could return from the brink of death. Having that sort of trump card would no doubt let Merry approach her battles with composure.

Haruhiro had learned another skill from Barbara-sensei in addition to Assault: Shatter. This was a skill that was chained after Swat to strike the enemy's knee. With two options that he could use following a Swat, Arrest and Shatter, it would give his attack patterns more variety. Instead of just using Swat to hold out, he could look for opportunities to go on the attack, then go in for the kill with Assault. That was the strategy Haruhiro had in mind.

Well, I doubt it will be that easy, but we each need to expand what we can do, and take it as far as we can, he thought. *If we do that, probably—no, definitely—we'll find a way forward.*

Haruhiro was optimistic. Or, at the very least, he was trying to be.

He wasn't a good one, but he was this party's leader nonetheless. A leader needed to hold his head high, moving forward one step, or even one half-step, at a time, or no one would follow him. In fact, if the leader wasn't moving forward, there was no way for anyone to follow.

It wasn't a question of whether he could do it or not. He had to start by just doing it. Nothing would start until he took that first step. If nothing ever started, there could be no results. Once there were some results, he would accept them, use them as nourishment, and move forward a little more.

—However.

"They're so late..." Haruhiro murmured.

"Yes... but..." Merry said.

"Yeah..."

"Maybe they slept in..." she suggested.

"...I'll bet."

"They could be tired from learning skills and whatnot..."

"Ohh," Haruhiro said. "Yeah, that could be it."

"I hope that's all..."

"Well, I think it probably is...?" Haruhiro said. "Normally... well, I am too... y'know? If you were to ask me whether I'm fully rested, I'm really not... Barbara-sensei's real strict... Ha ha ha..." Haruhiro's laughter sounded so stupid and incredibly vacuous that he felt awkward.

Damn, this isn't good, he thought. *What's with this atmosphere? This atmosphere, it's—Why? Why aren't they showing up? How can they be late on such an important day? Like, there's no way they should be, right? It's weird, seriously. They can't be late for this. That's obvious. Get your act together, okay? Or, what—could it be something else?*

Like, maybe, they're not late?

"Nah... Ha ha ha..." Haruhiro laughed again, trying to chase off the uncertainty welling up inside him. It didn't help in the slightest; it just made him want to run away.

He didn't, though. He'd seem like a weirdo if he did.

"They just aren't showing up, huh..." Haruhiro repeated.

"They aren't..." Merry agreed.

What do I do now? Haruhiro thought. *Merry's looking pretty worried, too. What's with this? Seriously, what's up? Ranta, I get. He didn't even try to get out of bed this morning. I mean, he's Ranta.*

But Shihoru and Yume, too, seriously? Yume may not be that punctual, but Shihoru takes things seriously. She's never been late to a meetup before. Not once. This is the first time. In that case, something must be up, and that's why they aren't here yet. That's the logical conclusion. After what happened to us, and with all of us like this, now this happens.

"Ah..." Merry mumbled.

When he looked at her, Merry was looking across the street. Haruhiro cast his gaze in that direction, too. Shihoru or Yume or Ranta must have come.

What, they're finally here? Haruhiro thought.

He was wrong.

There was a man who was quite tall but had poor posture walking towards them. He wore a breast plate, gauntlets, and a few other pieces of plate mail, but all of it looked secondhand. The breast plate had Lumiaris's hexagram engraved on it.

"Hey." The man stopped in front of Haruhiro, giving him a nod.

Though Haruhiro wasn't one to judge, he thought the guy looked awfully gloomy. He seemed out of place on such a fine morning.

"...Kuzaku," he said.

"Why are you...?" Merry looked down, fidgeting awkwardly—

Wait, her face is red? Why? Haruhiro thought. *What? What happened?*

"Ohh." Kuzaku brought his big hand to his forehead, scratching his right temple with his little finger. "Err. Yeah, let's say that never happened."

"Then don't say anything to begin with!" Merry exploded.

“Ah. Yeah, I guess I shouldn’t’ve, huh,” Kuzaku agreed.

“Huh? Huh…?!” Haruhiro butted in, unable to keep quiet. “Wh-What?! Hey, what’s up, did something… happen…?”

“Nothing!” Merry was completely losing it.

“Nah, nothing,” Kuzaku wore a vague expression, and it was impossible to get a grasp on what it all might mean.

—*Yeah, something happened,* Haruhiro thought. *Something definitely happened.*

But what is that something? How do these two even know each other? Are they acquaintances somehow? Kuzaku's our junior, so that's hard to imagine. Still, I can't be sure they aren't. Merry goes out drinking alone at night, so could they have met one of those times? And then, something happened? If something happened, it would have to be—that...?

Merry's looking down and gripping her staff. Kuzaku, on the other hand, he's acting like he feels awkward, but not really. Like, "It wasn't really a big deal." Like, "It happens all the time?" Like, "It was a one-time adventure"... Adventure...?! What's that?! Did they do it?!

Haruhiro slapped and rubbed his own chest, blinking repeatedly in confusion.

Yeah. Well, y'know? Whatever Merry does, that's her business, right? I have no right to stop her, or even to pry, yeah? Kuzaku's a tall guy, and for as gloomy as he looks, his face itself isn't bad. If you look at him the right way, he's pretty cool. Maybe. Not that I'd know! I don't know if a dude's face is hot or not! I can't make that call! I don't even want to! Like I care!

Okay. I've calmed down now. I'm fine now.

He was calm. Haruhiro's mind was as cool as ice, and as silent as standing atop a frozen lake.

"—So? What? Were you just passing by? That's not it, is it?" Haruhiro asked.

"Yeah, no. It's not."

"Well, what is it then?" Haruhiro demanded.

"...You're kind of scary today, huh?"

"Am I?" Haruhiro asked. "I don't think so. Well? Are you going to answer my question?"

"I'm here to ask a favor again, I guess you could say," Kuzaku said.

"Huh...?"

"The party. I'm asking you to let me join."

"Wha—" Haruhiro said.

"You were saying," Kuzaku said. "Saying something about not being able to decide alone. That if the others were around, you could ask their opinions, or something like that. You guys seemed like you'd be gathering somewhere."

—He's annoyingly persistent, Haruhiro thought. *I turned him down, right? Like, I gave him a pretty clear no, didn't I? He said "I see" in response, right? That was supposed to mean, "Okay, I get it, I'll give up," wasn't it?*

Haruhiro felt something like irritation and hostility swirling inside him, but he let it sit for a moment. He couldn't just unleash it on the guy as it was. It wouldn't be good. He was the leader. Maybe it was because he was the leader that he couldn't do that. He wasn't sure, but a voice inside Haruhiro was ordering him to smooth things over and keep up appearances.

"...I said that, yeah," Haruhiro said. "I did. I said that, but that's got nothing to do with this."

"How so?" Kuzaku asked.

"Huh? Well, you know... that's that and this is this."

"What is 'this'?" Kuzaku asked.

"Th-This is..."

Oh, crap, Haruhiro thought. *I'm not thinking straight. I'm not keeping up appearances at all. What's going on here? Am I losing my cool? Like, totally? I can't deny that...*

“Haruhiro, man.” Kuzaku glanced over to Merry. “Did you talk to your comrades about me? If you did, some of them might be in favor of it, right? I wouldn’t know, though.”

“...No, I didn’t,” Haruhiro said.

“I...!” Merry sounded shrill, but she coughed to clear her throat. “...I-I might not... be in favor of it, really...”

Haruhiro grinned. “See!”

“What do you mean, see?” a rude voice broke in.

“Huh?! What do I mean—” Haruhiro jumped back in surprise. “Whoa! Ranta?!”

“No need to act so surprised,” Ranta said. “Is there something wrong with you, man?”

Ranta, Haruhiro thought. *When did Ranta get so close to me? He’s right beside me. No, it’s not just Ranta. Shihoru and Yume are here, too. They look surprised. I’m the one who ought to be surprised here.*

“Whaaaat?” Ranta said, digging the earwax out of his ears and narrowing his eyes. “Who’re you, pal? No, I know that face. Hm...? One of our juniors, yeah? Huh? Man, didn’t you die at Deadhead? Are you a zombie?”

“I’m still breathing. Pretty sure I’m alive.”

“Whoa there,” Ranta said. “You’re acting pretty uppity for one of my juniors. You wanna go? I’ll take you one-on-one.”

“Nah. I’ll pass. No reason for it,” Kuzaku said.

“Ho ho,” Ranta laughed. “So that’s how you’re gonna be. That’s how you’re gonna be, huh. You may be a liiiittle taller than me, but you’d better not look down on me, got it?”

“A little, huh,” Kuzaku said.

"It's more like a lot," Yume said, comparing Ranta and Kuzaku's heights. "He's got twenty centimeters on you, don't you think?"

"You idiot, it can't be that much!" Ranta blustered. "Where're you even looking, you moron?!"

"I think I'm probably 191 or 192 centimeters," Kuzaku said.

Shihoru snickered. "Ranta-kun can't be as tall as 171 centimeters. Maybe you've got more than 20 centimeters on him…"

"I am, too!" Ranta shouted. "I'm easily over 170 centimeters! Of course I am! I'm over 180! And what's this big oaf doing here, anyway?!"

"No, before we get to that—" Haruhiro looked to Ranta, Shihoru and Yume in turn. They all seemed unwilling to look him in the eye, as if they felt guilty about something. That was how it felt to him. "Why… Why are you so late? Didn't we agree to meet up by the north gate at eight o'clock? I don't expect Ranta to respect that, but you two…"

"Yeah, about that," Ranta nonchalantly revealed something Haruhiro couldn't believe he was hearing. "Thing is, I've got an invite from Renji. He was asking if I'd join Team Renji."

"Oh…" Haruhiro nearly fell over. "Huh…?"

"Yume and Shihoru got one, too, y'know," said Yume.

"Too…?"

"They were sayin' we could join the Wild Angels. Kajiko-chan tried to recruit us."

"—Ka…"

Oh, crap. Oh, crap. Oh, crap. Haruhiro felt weak in the knees and ankles. *I'm gonna fall over. Seriously. No, not over. Down. Into the*

depths of hell.

"H-Haru...!" Merry moved in to support him, so he managed to stay on his feet, but he felt like he might not be able to go on like this. No, not might—he couldn't.

What was it for? he wondered. *What have all our struggles up until now been for? What have we worked so hard for? Don't they care? Does all our hard work mean nothing? No matter how hard we strive, we can't make something work if it's not going to work, is that it? I mean, we were a group of rejects, after all.*

No—someone had decided they needed Ranta, Shihoru and Yume. Ranta. That Ranta. And it was Renji, of all people. This meant Haruhiro was worse than Ranta. It meant that Haruhiro was the real reject.

Merry, too. But Merry was a priest. If she just kept her mouth shut, someone would call her to join them. There was an overwhelming difference in the level of demand for a thief and for a priest.

Haruhiro's future looked bleak. There was nothing but utter darkness. He was in the darkness.

"Whoa..." Kuzaku looked at them, furrowing his brow. "Looks like you've got other problems before deciding whether to let me in."

He's right, Haruhiro thought. *He's so damn right. I don't have time for him.*

"...Sorry. Thanks, Merry." Haruhiro moved away from Merry, taking a deep, deep breath.

Now, then, he thought. *What am I going to do? From here on out. I need to think about what I'm going to do with myself. I know. I was never volunteer soldier material to begin with, so maybe I'll take up a trade. Find someone willing to take me on as an apprentice. It sounds like hard work, and I doubt I can handle doing business. But, if I work at it diligently, maybe it'll work out. It's not like I'll die if I mess up, so it's easier. Easier than this.*

"Huh? You want to join up?" Ranta looked Kuzaku up and down, from the top of his head to the tips of his toes. "A paladin, huh. I see."

“Ohh.” For some reason, Yume slapped Kuzaku on the arms and shoulders, as if testing how hard they were. “What’s a pallydin do?”

“...Well, fight with a sword, and stuff?” Kuzaku was taken aback. “Also, we can use light magic, so we can do some healing. We can’t heal ourselves, though. Other than that, we can defend with a shield.”

“They can do all sortsa stuff, huh,” Yume said.

“Sortsa...? Well... I dunno about that,” said Kuzaku. “I don’t think so.”

“...Basically, you’re a tank... right?” Shihoru asked hesitantly.

Kuzaku gave a vague nod. “Yeah, something like that.”

“You’re not very clear on that!” Ranta said, scoffing. “If you wanna join our party, you need to be clear on this stuff. How else are we supposed to decide?”

“Huh...?” Merry blinked repeatedly, her eyes darting around from person to person.

Haruhiro’s head was still all fuzzy, so he thought something was strange, but he wasn’t really sure what.

“Hm?” Ranta cast a suspicious glance over towards Haruhiro. “What? You’re acting way too weird. You’re creeping me out, man.”

“...No, I dunno what it is, but... I don’t want you, of all people, calling me creepy,” said Haruhiro.

“I’m only saying you’re acting creepy because you are,” said Ranta. “If you don’t want to be called creepy, then don’t be creepy.”

“What’s creepy is all a matter of perspective. That’s just your—No, that’s not it!” Haruhiro burst out.

“What?” Ranta asked.

"Huh?! No, I mean, Renji... he invited you to join him, right? And Kajiko did the same with Shihoru and Yume. If you were all late because of that, that must mean..."

"Sorry 'bout that," Yume said.

I knew it, Haruhiro couldn't help but think. What else was there to think? *See.*

See. Look at that. That's how it is, in the end. I was ready for it, so I'm fine, though. Only there's no way I was ready for it, and I'm totally not fine!

"Yume, to tell you the truth, when Kajiko-chan invited her, she really didn't know what to do," Yume said.

"I'll bet," Haruhiro said with a forced smile. "I mean, it's Kajiko. She's famous."

"...She was being very kind," Shihoru said, shrinking into herself. "...She was considerate, and she told us about all sorts of things. The conditions were good, too..."

"For me, Renji told me I was gonna be useful, you know? He didn't even call me Curly, he called me by name! 'Ranta'..." Ranta said, lowering his voice. He may have been trying to imitate Renji, but it just looked like he was making a funny face. "'You're going to become useful,' he said! Gahahahahahahahah! People who get it, really get it! My shining talent, that is!"

"I'll bet," Haruhiro narrowed his eyes. "I'll bet. Yep. I never could use you properly. Yeah. I'll bet that's it..."

"Yeah," Ranta agreed. "Renji was saying that, too. He said you wouldn't be able to use me right."

"...I see." Haruhiro ground his teeth. If Renji, the guy who had quickly rounded up people he could use, formed Team Renji, and run straight down the path to stardom, was the one saying it, Haruhiro

couldn't argue back. Haruhiro had no aptitude for leadership. He knew that so badly that it hurt. It was obvious.

"So, that being the case, I had to really wrack my brains over what I was gonna do, y'know," Ranta said, poking Haruhiro lightly, no, really hard, in the shoulder. "You better be grateful, Parupiroooo!"

"Ow—wait, huh? Grateful? For what?"

"Huhhh? For me! Ranta-sama! I decided to stay with the party, man!" Ranta shouted. "You ought to be so damn grateful that you cry, like, three liters' worth of tears!"

"—Huh?" Haruhiro said, stunned.

"Yume and Shihoru, too," Yume said, rubbing her cheeks. "We thought reeeeal hard about it, y'know. Talkin' it over together. Yume, honestly, she wasn't so confident about goin' on like this. She was worried she might end up causin' trouble for everyone else. Yume was scared. Until this mornin', she wasn't sure what she was gonna do."

"As for me, I couldn't decide anything by myself..." Shihoru pulled her mage's hat down. "I thought that was pathetic of me. There might be no place for me... people might be better off without me... That's what I started to think. I asked myself if I could support everyone... If I was going to carry on with this party, I knew I had to be prepared to do at least that much... And if I joined a stronger group, life might be easier..."

"It might be, yeah, but Yume and Shihoru made a decision," Yume said, clenching her hands into fists. "To stay in this party where Manato was, where Moguzo was, and where Haru-kun and everyone else still are. Yume and Shihoru wanted to run away. It's been painful, y'know. But, if Yume ran away, she knew she'd regret it later, and, really—Yume doesn't want to leave everyone else."

"Wh-What's with you?" Ranta was blushing slightly. "Despite how you normally act, you feel that strongly, huh? About me..."

"Of course, Ranta, you're just somethin' extra that comes with all that," Yume added.

"Who're you calling an extra, you dolt?! I'll grab your ass and squeeze it, you moron!"

"You perv!" Yume shot back. "You're worth less than an unwanted extra! You're worse than garbage!"

Yume and Ranta were back to their usual bantering.

Haruhiro looked to Merry. Merry still looked dazed, as if she couldn't believe it. Haruhiro probably looked the same.

"Um..." Shihoru bowed her head vigorously, leaning so far forward that it looked like she was hunched over, and her hat fell to the ground. Shihoru quickly picked it up and put it back on, then bowed again. "...Sorry. For being indecisive. But... I didn't want to lie. If I hadn't been clear about things, some day it would definitely have created a rift, you could say... or something bad would have come of it, I thought. If I hadn't come out and tell you about everything... including my weakness, I didn't think I could move forward..."

"Hmph." Ranta snorted and crossed his arms, looking away from her. "If you've got a chance to take the next step up dangling in front of you, it's only natural to want to take it. What're you apologizing for?"

Haruhiro cocked his head to the side. "...Well, then why did you pass up that chance? If you'd felt like it, you could have gotten into Renji's party."

"I did it to take the next step up. Isn't that obvious?"

"I don't really get it..." Haruhiro said.

"What, you don't? That's why you're a moron," Ranta said. "Now, listen. If someone offers to pull me up, and I go along with them because they order me to, it's meaningless. For me, that's not making

progress or anything close to it. Crawling up towards the top using my own strength, that's what makes things interesting. That's what I call taking a step up. It's the one true way to do it. You get it?"

"...Vaguely?" Haruhiro said.

"Don't just understand it vaguely, understand it completely! Besides, I don't care if it's Renji, or Kenji, or Gejigeji, but it's presumptuous as hell for him to think he can lift me up. If anyone'd be doing the lifting, it'd be me. So, basically, I'm saying I'll lift you people up a level or two! Try not to do anything that'd embarrass me while I'm at it! That's your duty! Let's hear your response! Yes or yes?!"

"Yes or yes...?" Yume asked, puffing up her cheeks and pouting. "If you say it like that, they're both the same, aren't they?"

"Yeah, that's kinda the point!"

"...Erm," Kuzaku pointed to himself. "What about me?"

"Who cares!" Ranta made a gesture like he was flipping over a garbage pail. "I don't give a damn about what happens to a big oaf like you!"

"A pallydin, huh," Yume knitted her eyebrows. "Hrm..."

"...It's kind of sudden..." Shihoru said, trying not to look at Kuzaku.

Ranta may have been holding a misplaced grudge against him over the height difference thing. Yume and Shihoru didn't know how to react when it had been brought up so suddenly. Merry didn't seem that keen on the idea because of something that had happened between them, and Haruhiro didn't want to complicate matters when they had just managed to sort things out.

"Kuzaku," Haruhiro said. "I'm sorry, but I really can't—"

"Please." Kuzaku bowed very, very deeply. When he put his hands

on his knees, leaning forward more than 90 degrees, it carried great intensity.

"—Please. I'm not asking this with half-hearted feelings. I'm serious. In my own way."

"Well, yeah, I'll bet you are," Ranta snorted. "We've all got to make a living somehow. But you can't do it alone. We're missing a tank right now, and we're the lowest of the low. If anyone's going to take you, it'd be us, is that it?"

"...That's not it," Kuzaku said.

"Yeah, then what is it?" Ranta demanded.

"I want to join you people," Kuzaku raised just his face, looking at Haruhiro with upturned eyes. "I was watching you all at Deadhead. Honestly, I didn't think you were strong at all. If anything, you seemed unreliable. And yet, you helped us, and by the end, you were fighting on the front lines. Me, I almost died, so my memories are hazy, but I could hear things. Your voices, for one. I thought you were amazing. It would've been easier to understand if you looked strong, but even though you didn't, you were still able to put up a good fight. I thought that was cool. I thought I was going to die there. So, I was thinking, I wish I could've been like you. Why was I so irresponsible and halfhearted? I wish I'd taken things more seriously. That was what I was thinking. All while I was listening to your voices. I should have died. But when I came to, I was alive. All my comrades were dead, but I was the only one still alive."

Haruhiro couldn't look away from him.

Damn it, he thought. *This guy's serious.*

He was laying his honest feelings out for Haruhiro and the others. Haruhiro couldn't just brush that off. If he was going to reject him, he would need a suitable, justified reason that he felt strongly about.

Did he have one? A reason that was good enough to send Kuzaku away.

If he said he just didn't like him, or that it was too soon after they'd lost Moguzo, would Kuzaku be satisfied with that? Could Haruhiro convince himself that it was okay to have done that?

"I'm cool, huh?" Ranta brushed a hand through his curly hair, then grinned. He didn't mind the praise—or rather, he seemed to be feeling pretty good about it. "Kinda, I guess? Though, being told the plain truth like that doesn't make me feel all that happy, you know? But, if you can recognize my coolness, you've got some serious potential."

"No. I didn't mean just you, I meant everyone," said Kuzaku.

"Don't contradict me there! You're supposed to agree! It's blatantly obvious that's better for both of us!"

"A proper tank," Shihoru spoke hesitantly, "is something we need, I think."

"Yeah." Yume crossed her arms and nodded repeatedly. "If Ranta's the tank, it'll be a real mess. Gotta do somethin' about that."

Haruhiro looked to Merry to gauge her reaction. "...Merry?"

Merry furrowed her brow and bit the corner of her mouth a little. "—If the party needs it. I don't really care."

"Buuuut!" Ranta leveled a finger at Kuzaku. "It's only temporary for now! Temporary! During the probationary period, if you're not up to our level, or you can't keep up with the rest of us, or you can't understand my sophisticated gags, or you don't worship me, or you don't pay me tribute, or if any problem comes up that can't be resolved, you're fired! Fired! Got it?"

"Don't just decide things on your own..." Haruhiro muttered.

"Shove off, Haruhiro!" Ranta shouted. "I'm making the decision because you don't have it together enough to! You need to be decisive from here on, or I'm not going to be shy about taking command! You'd better get ready for that!"

"That's no good!" Yume clung to Haruhiro. "Haru-kun, get your act together! If Ranta gets to do whatever he wants, it'll be totally awful! Yume, she won't be able to stand that!"

Shihoru raised her hand. "...Same here."

Merry was nodding, too.

"What's wrong with all of you?!" Ranta shouted, spittle flying everywhere. "I'm doing this to get this indecisive, wishy-washy, good-for-nothing to step up to the plate!"

"I know," Haruhiro said, stroking his chin. "I get that, man."

"...Y-You do?" Ranta stammered. "If you get it, well then—"

"There are way too many problems with the way you're saying it, though," Haruhiro said. "Though, in your case, you've got a difficult personality to begin with, so I guess there's no point in complaining."

"Oh, shut up!" Ranta shouted. "Just be quiet! Seriously! Seriously!"

"Kuzaku," Haruhiro said.

When Haruhiro ignored the far-too-noisy Ranta and called his name, Kuzaku was still bent over and looking up at him.

Maybe he's a surprisingly decent guy, Haruhiro thought. *I can't say anything for sure. Though I guess it only makes sense that I wouldn't know. I can find out from here on. If we're working together, I'm sure I'll start to see that with time. —That goes for whatever happened with Merry, too. No, I don't care about that. I need to think about work and their private lives separately.*

"I'm not going to put you on probation like Ranta said, but I don't expect you to really fit in at first," said Haruhiro. "You're a paladin, and we'll be making you act as the tank, so you'll be carrying a lot of the burden. It's going to be hard, I'm sure. You may find you're not up to it. Are you still okay with that?"

"Yeah, that's fine," said Kuzaku. "It's good enough."

"Okay. Well, welcome to the group, then."

When Haruhiro offered him his right hand, Kuzaku finally stood up straight again and shook his hand.

For as big and bony as he is, his hand is soft, Haruhiro thought. *His grip's not that firm, so he seems kind of unreliable. He's not very tank-y, you could say. Is this going to be okay?*

On top of that, even though Haruhiro had loosened his grip already, for some reason Kuzaku wasn't letting go of his hand.

"...Um," Haruhiro said. "Could you let go now?"

"Oh," Kuzaku said. "My bad."

"Nah, it's nothing to feel bad about..."

"Okay!" Ranta pointed northward. "Now that that's settled, we're setting out! Come to think of it, we never did decide where we'd go, did we?! I have an idea! New hunting grounds, perfect for getting into a new mindset as we set out anew today! It's the next generation, new spirit hunting world!"

Yume tilted her head to the side. "Newspirimahuntinword...?"

"...Y-Yume..." Shihoru tugged on Yume's arm.

"Hoh? Shihoru, what's up?"

"...I-It's not that anything's up, it's just..."

“Where’s that?”

When Kuzaku asked that, sounding tired, Ranta laughed and said, “Listen, and try not to be amazed! It’s the Wonder Hole!”

13. Don’t Stop Walking

It might have been true that Haruhiro and the party had needed to venture out into new and unfamiliar places.

Haruhiro and his group had been like insects clinging to the frontier of Grimgar. They’d had no wings, and so they could fly nowhere else. Fortunately, however, they did have legs. They could walk forward.

As they progressed, sights they had yet to see would unfold before them. Beneath the boundless skies, the land seemed to go on forever. It felt like they could go anywhere.

Honestly, when he thought of going back to the Old City of Damuro again, or to the Cyrene Mines, it weighed him down. Still, Haruhiro had thought there was no other option. He’d figured that if they were going to take it slow and steady, making adjustments as they went, really, the first three levels of the Cyrene Mines seemed like the most appropriate place.

He had been taking too narrow of a view; he realized that now. He felt like he had come to a dead end, but he’d neglected to gather information.

It all made Haruhiro keenly aware of how mediocre he was. As a thief and as a volunteer soldier he was average, and as an individual, he was plain and lacking in imagination. He could only look at things from an all-too-common viewpoint, unable to make the logical leaps he would need to to see things another way. Calling that having a grounded outlook might make it sound good, but not only could he

not make those leaps, he didn't even think to try.

That was why Ranta's flights of fancy were so valuable. It was a terrible idea to let Ranta run wild and free. But Haruhiro ought to integrate some of the idea Ranta had come up with, the one that he would never have thought up himself.

"Okay! The Quickwind Plains! Yee-hawwww!" Ranta bellowed.

Obviously, no matter what happened, he would never imitate the idiotic way Ranta was shouting like a moron and running full-tilt towards the plains.

"Yahoooo-hoy! Helloooo! Quickwind Plains! Wahahahahahahaha! Hot damn, I'm excited, wow! Gwahahahaha!"

"Can I ask something?" Kuzaku asked Haruhiro, pointing to the screaming moron. "Is that normal for Ranta-kun?"

"Yeah, sorta..." Haruhiro said.

"Wow..."

"Huh?" Ranta said, turning just the upper half of his body around to look at them. "What? Did I just hear you dissing me?"

"No one's dissing you," Kuzaku said plainly. "It was more of a 'Huh, Ranta-kun sure is different.' That's all."

"Gwahahahahaha! That sounds like a compliment! Hurray for being rare!" Ranta shouted.

Even though everyone else was fed up with him, Ranta himself seemed happy about it. Seriously, what a blissful idiot.

But, well, when they were out in a wide open space like this, it felt incredibly liberating.

Yume, Shihoru and Merry seemed so taken with the magnificent scenery that they were at a loss for words.

When they headed six kilometers north of Alterna to Deadhead Watching Keep, then a little over an hour north through sparse woods, there were plains that could only be described as boundlessly vast. Perhaps due to the openness, the winds there were strong. That was probably where the name “Quickwind Plains” came from.

The plains were wide and vast, but not empty like a ruined wasteland. They felt like a perfectly natural prairie.

At first glance, it looked like it was all flat grasslands, but there were trees, too, and it wasn’t as if there were no rises and falls in the terrain. It was just, with the vastness of it all, the trees looked like no more than slightly tall grass, and the slight hills here and there were a rounding error at best.

Just how far did these plains go on for? Did they even have an end?

“Hm...” Ranta shaded his eyes with his hand, looking around. He tilted his head to the side. “Y’know, I don’t see anything out there. Like, there’re no animals. You’d think there would be.”

“Now that you mention it...” Haruhiro squinted and looked off into the distance. Not only were there no signs of people, there were no signs of any living creatures whatsoever. That was pretty strange, come to think of it. “Do you think they’re hiding? No... There’s not really anywhere *to* hide out there...”

“Ah!” cried Yume, pointing out into the distance. “There’s somethin’ out there!”

“Huh?” Haruhiro looked in the direction Yume was pointing. “...Where?”

“...Maybe,” Shihoru mumbled.

“You mean that?” Merry asked, seeming to have found it, too.

“Ahhh,” Kuzaku said, his face twitching a little. “Me, my eyes aren’t so good, you know.”

“What?! Where?!” Ranta was as annoyingly loud as ever. “Where, where is it?! I don’t see it! Are you sure you’re not imagining things?! You guys’ve gotta be hallucinating, right?! If I can’t see it, that’s gotta be—Wait, whoaaaaaaaa...?! Is that it?!”

“Oh...” Haruhiro had found what everyone else had probably meant. It was rather far off in the distance, on the other side of some bushes. There was something there. Some thing that was something. That was too vague to be any use, but, well, it was a long way off, so he couldn’t say anything definitive about it.

“That’s...” Haruhiro began.

“...something living, maybe?” Ranta finished for him. He was squinting so hard, his eyes were like slits. “Yeahhhh. It feels like it’s moving to me, so it’s gotta be alive, I guess?”

“It’s movin’, yeah.” Yume was technically—no, not just technically, she actually was a hunter—and she had been trained in archery, so she could see further than the rest of them. “...It’s movin’. That’s probably what you’d call it. It’s walkin’, maybe?”

“...Walking?” Shihoru was practically clutching her staff. “Then, is it bipedal?”

“It’s long and thin...” Merry murmured.

Even to Haruhiro’s eyes, the silhouette looked long and thin, or rather tall and thin. At the very least, it didn’t seem to be a four-legged beast.

“But, y’know...” Haruhiro said.

Those bushes.

The bushes in front of the thing in question... were they really bushes? After all, those bushes were pretty far away from here. Maybe those weren’t bushes, and they were actually a copse of fairly tall trees?

On top of that, the ground that copse of trees was on was slightly elevated.

In other words, that would mean it was walking on the other side of a copse of trees on a little hill.

Haruhiro's eyes went wide. "I-It's kinda huge, isn't it?! That thing?!"

"Nuwah?!" Ranta jumped back in exaggerated surprise. "S-Seriously! Now that I think about it, that thing's gotta be gigantic!"

"Human..." Yume said suddenly. "That thing. To Yume, it's lookin' like it's human-shaped, y'know..."

"Nah..." Kuzaku said with a wry laugh. "That can't be right."

"A giant," Merry said in a low voice. "I've heard of them before. There are giants living on the Quickwind Plains."

"Heyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!" Ranta suddenly cupped both his hands around his mouth like a horn, then shouted.

The hell are you doing, man? Haruhiro thought.

Before Haruhiro could come up with a witty comedic jab, Merry whacked Ranta in the back of the head with her short staff.

"Gwah! What're you doing, Merry, you bitch!" Ranta yelled.

"Are you an idiot?!" she shot back.

"Huhh?! Who're you calling an idiot?! You know what, there's an ancient rule that says it takes one to know one!"

"What are you going to do if the giant comes this way?!" Merry retorted.

"If it happens, it happens! I'll figure it out then! It's no big deal! You've got me here! If it wants to pick a fight, I've just got to cut it

down to size!”

“Hoh…” Yume backed away. “…Y-Y’know, the giant, it just stopped… maybe?”

“Run for it!” Ranta had taken off at a dash before the words were even out of his mouth.

Kuzaku watched, looking dumbfounded. “He changed his mind awful quickly.”

“That’s just what he’s like…” Shihoru sighed.

“L-Let’s run!” Haruhiro shouted, waving an arm and gesturing for everyone to move.

Ranta was already looking pretty small off in the distance. He was fast when it came to running away.

Haruhiro let Yume and Shihoru, Kuzaku, and Merry go on ahead of him, serving as the rearguard. He turned to look behind him, never stopping his legs. Was the giant getting closer? Was it not moving at all? Haruhiro couldn’t tell with his mediocre vision. But it didn’t feel like it was getting any further away, so he figured they had better keep running for now.

To the west.

To the west.

Far to the west.

The Frontier Army’s Lonesome Field Outpost was around 35 kilometers to the west of here. Lonesome Field Outpost served as the operating base for Blue Snake Force, the unit that handled the attack on Riverside Iron Fortress in Operation Two-Headed Snake. It was called an outpost, but there were far more people living there than just Frontier Army personnel. It was practically a town in its own right. The entrance to the Wonder Hole was supposedly somewhere

near Lonesome Field Outpost.

As he was running, Haruhiro's eyes met with Merry's as she turned around. They couldn't say for certain if the giant was chasing them. They weren't running as fast as they could, so they could afford to talk.

"Come to think of it, Merry," Haruhiro said as he ran. "Your staff."

"Huh?" she asked, not slacking her pace.

"What happened to it? That's not the one you had before, is it?"

"Ah! This is—" Merry glanced up ahead. Unless Haruhiro was mistaken, she was probably looking at Kuzaku. "Um, I sort of lost it..."

"I... see," Haruhiro said.

"It was time to buy a new one, anyway," she said. "My old one wasn't very practical in combat."

"Ahh," he said. "Do you think the new one's easier to smack stuff with?"

"Yes," she said. "That's it. This one's simpler than my last one! It's better as a weapon."

"Well, it's a good thing you changed, then," he said.

"It is a good thing."

"I see. Good, good. Ha ha..."

I feel like she's trying to pull the wool over my eyes about something. Still, what happened between her and Kuzaku? I can more or less imagine, but I don't want to imagine it.

They probably spent twenty to twenty-five minutes running. Yume said she could still see the giant in the distance, but Haruhiro and the

others no longer could. Figuring they were probably safe now, they switched to walking.

From that point on, they walked across the fields of grass.

At first glance, it looked flat, but there were bumps here and there, and the ground was softer or harder, so sometimes it was easy to walk and sometimes it wasn't. It was surprisingly tiring.

Technically, there were roads that went to Lonesome Field Outpost. Haruhiro and the others just couldn't find them. They ought to have been heading in the right direction, so that was somewhat disconcerting.

Eventually, they started to see groups of animals here and there. It must have been because of the giant that they hadn't seen any earlier. Most of them seemed to be herbivores, but they knew there had to be carnivores which preyed on them, so it was a little bit scary. However, being a hunter, Yume had studied the different animals to some degree, so she was knowledgeable about them. While there were definitely some that were dangerous, she said they didn't have to be too worried.

If the route there was thirty-five kilometers, traveling at four kilometers per hour, they could make the trek in a little under nine hours. It seemed possible that they would arrive today, but they'd left prepared to camp out. Partly due to that, they hadn't been able to leave Alterna until after lunch, so they weren't going to be able to make it there today, after all.

As it gradually grew darker, they made the decision to camp out. Though, that said, all that meant was eating preserved food, wrapping themselves in blankets, and then going to sleep. They talked about maybe setting a campfire, but it seemed like too much trouble to gather things they could burn, so they gave up.

The curtain of night descended over the Quickwind Plains in no time. Though, with the red moon out, it wasn't totally dark. It may not have been pitch black darkness, but it was dark enough to feel

oppressive.

The wind had grown weaker starting in the evening. Now it was more of a gentle breeze.

Somewhere out there, there were animals making their various sounds. After they heard a howling off in the distance, Shihoru called out to Yume, asking, “Um... What was that?”

“Hm... A horned maned dog, maybe?” Yume asked. “They’re like wolves, and they go huntin’ in packs at night. That’s what Master said.”

“...Will they hunt for us?” Shihoru asked.

“Not sure about that,” Yume answered. “Master said they don’t attack humans that often, though.”

“...Not that often...”

“There’s nothin’ absolute in nature, so be careful,” Yume explained. “That’s what Master was sayin’.”

“...Nothing is absolute...” Shihoru murmured.

“Listen, you...” Ranta said, sounding sleepy. “Don’t say things that are going to stir up anxiety. Because Shihoru’s a wimp. Right, Wimpy? I’m right, aren’t I?”

“...I wish the dogs could come and drag off just Ranta.”

“Huh? Did you say something, Wimpette?”

“...I didn’t say anything,” Shihoru said. “I can’t sleep with you being noisy, so would you please be quiet?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Fiiiiiine. I’m tired, too.” He yawned loudly. “Fwahhhh...”

After that loud yawn, Ranta was snoring in no time. At times like

this, one had to envy his audacity.

Merry was silent. Kuzaku, too. Were they sleeping, or not? Shihoru kept turning over. It seemed like she couldn't get to sleep. Yume was breathing shallowly as she slept.

The later in the night it got, the more awake Haruhiro felt. He could hear the horned maned dogs howling every once in a while, and could sense something moving not far away. It wasn't going to be easy sleeping like this.

Even so, with his comrades sleeping, he couldn't make a fuss about it and wake them. All he could do was sit still, thinking, *Wh-Whoa, that's scary. It's seriously scary.*

Then an event occurred that forced him to act. It wasn't the horned maned dogs howling. He heard a low roaring sound.

No, not a sound, a voice. From a carnivore.

He wasn't sure, but he had the vague sense that it was probably from one of the big cats. It felt like it was relatively close. As he was trembling, there it was again—*Roar.*

"...!"

Oh crap, Haruhiro thought frantically. *Not good, not good, not good, not good, not good, not good. It's coming, it's coming, it's coming. That one was closer than the last. Seriously, seriously, seriously. Is it coming to eat us? Time for a nice meal? We're gonna get eaten? Is this one of those things? Like, how I should wake everyone up? It's pretty clear I've got to at this point. But, you know, if I move, it feels like it'll attack? Like, that'll be what triggers it to pounce? Now's a bad time? I should wait and see what happens? I dunno. Which is it? What's the right answer? And, hold on, I can't move. I'm too scared. No, no, no. While I'm wasting time, I could get killed.*

Haruhiro tried to draw his dagger and sap.

Should I get up first? But, you know, I really do think moving too much could be dangerous. If I'm going to get up, it needs to be one quick movement. First, I should check the area around me. I'll move my head just a little, along with my eyes, to look around the area. I don't know. It's dark. It's dark, okay? Damn, it's dark. It's too dark. It's not there... or at least I don't think it is. I can't see in the darkness, so I can't say for sure. I'll listen closely. For the next one. I'll judge based on its next roar. Aughhhhhhhhhhh, dammit, Ranta's snoring is too loud. Pipe down, would you? Please. Its roar. Is it not doing it yet? Is it still not doing it yet? There.

Haruhiro heard it. A tiny roar.

It was tiny. Has it moved away? Seems like it. But it's too soon to relax... I think. Probably.

He tried waiting a while longer, but wait as he might, he didn't hear it. It was probably safe at this point. Haruhiro sat up, and a moment later, Merry groggily sat up, too.

"Now..." she murmured. "Just now, there was something here, right? Whatever it was..."

"Y-Yeah," Haruhiro said. "There was. Did you hear them? Those roars."

"I-I did," she said. "It was scary..."

"I know, right?" Haruhiro agreed. "I-I did, too... Hold on, everyone else, they're totally asleep..."

"I haven't slept a wink," Merry said.

"Yeah, me either..."

It was dark, so they couldn't see each other's faces, but it all started to seem a bit funny, so they both laughed a little. Then the horned maned dogs howled again, making them both jump a little.

"...Haru, do you think it's safe now?" Merry asked.

I dunno... he almost said, but he stopped himself.

"—Yeah. It'll be fine."

"Okay," Merry said.

"Why don't you get some sleep?" Haruhiro asked. "I'll be up until I get tired. Ah... we probably should have taken shifts standing watch, huh? When we're out like this."

"You're right," she said.

"Well, when I can't fight off the tiredness any longer, I'll wake Ranta, or someone," said Haruhiro.

"Or you could wake me," Merry said.

"Yeah. I might do that."

"Well, good night."

"Sleep tight," Haruhiro said. "—Ah, Merry."

"What?"

"Listen..." Haruhiro shook his head and sighed. "...Sorry. I forget what I was going to say."

"Okay. ...Good night."

"Yeah." Merry lay down.

Haruhiro stayed sitting. As he looked up to the red moon, it reminded him of Moguzo for some reason. He would never see Moguzo again, but that didn't make him feel sad or lonely, it just felt strange.

That can't be right, can it...? he thought. But that was reality.

Around the time that the eastern sky began to brighten just a little, Kuzaku woke up.

“Huh?” Kuzaku asked. “What’re you up for?”

“I couldn’t get to sleep,” Haruhiro said. “Well, that, and I’m keeping watch, too.”

“Wouldn’t you be better off sleeping?” asked Kuzaku. “If you need someone to be on watch, I can do it.”

Haruhiro took Kuzaku up on the offer and lay down to sleep. His eyelids immediately began to feel heavy, and he managed to get some sleep.

When he awoke, Haruhiro and the others had a simple meal, then set off early in the morning. Along the way, he told them about the carnivore that had approached during the night, but they made a joke out of it. Merry didn’t seem happy about that.

In the afternoon, they encountered a vast, slightly elevated plateau. Once they climbed up it, there was a basin past there.

It was clear at first glance that this pot-like depression in the land was Lonesome Field. When they looked around, they saw there were little towers around what would be the rim of the pot. Watchtowers, most likely.

There were a number of springs in the bottom of the pot, as well as a town surrounded by a moat and a fence.

Yes, a town.

It’s a town, Haruhiro thought.

It was nothing too impressive, but there were more than ten to twenty buildings, along with the roads between them. They could also see people roaming around. This could only be called a town.

“Heh…” Ranta brushed his nose with his thumb. “Here at last, finally, we’ve finally made it. Lonesome Field Outpost.”

He might have been trying to sound cool, but he wasn’t cool in the slightest. Still, if they said anything, he’d just start a fight over it. Haruhiro and the others ignored Ranta, making no hurry as they descended the slope into the bottom of the pot. No matter how much of a fuss Ranta made, no one paid him any attention.

The moat around the outpost was thicker than it had looked from a distance, and it was deep, too. It was filled with water that had probably been drawn from the nearby springs. The sturdy-looking fence was built on top of a two-meter-high platform of compacted dirt, so it wouldn’t be easy to climb. There only seemed to be one entrance, with a bridge over the moat at that point. There was a narrow gap in the dirt wall with a gate there.

Just in front of the bridge, next to the moat, there were a number of tents dotted around. They might be tents, but some of them were quite large and impressive. This might have been where the volunteer soldiers lived.

There were soldiers from the Frontier Army standing in front of the gate. There were two of them beside the gate, but the towers on either side of it held more than ten, some of whom had their crossbows leveled at Haruhiro and his comrades. They seemed to be on edge, but when the group showed them their Volunteer Soldier Corps badges, they did at least let them through.

Inside the base, the road leading from the gate was lined with large buildings that served as stables and barracks. Once they got past that section, they reached a plaza. On the far side of a plaza was something like a keep. It looked pretty secure, and was probably a command center of some sort. There were a number of buildings crowded around that command center that were probably of a military nature, too.

They could hear men shouting at regular intervals. They must have

been training somewhere.

The soldiers of the Frontier Army that they saw standing here and there, or patrolling the area, either paid no heed to Haruhiro and the rest of the party, or occasionally shot them looks of scorn but did nothing else.

However, when they cut between two barracks and went into the back streets, the atmosphere changed. There were a number of gaudy buildings that wouldn't have looked out of place next to the bars of Celestial Alley.

There were women walking the streets languidly. There were blacksmiths. There were rows of stalls. There were street vendors. There were even a number of lodging houses that looked better than the barracks.

There were men and women that they could immediately tell were volunteer soldiers, too. They were seated at the different food stalls, eating and drinking, or were making deals with the various merchants.

It was a market, a place for entertainment, and a residential district all at once. From a cursory glance at the stalls, there was a reasonably wide variety of weapons and armor on offer. It might even have had Alterna beat for selection. There weren't many daily necessities or foodstuffs available, but that was probably due to a lack of demand.

One thing that set it apart was that there were merchants selling caged animals that they had never seen before. When they asked about it, they were told there were also horses, horse-dragons, deer-horses, and other large animals for riding and carrying cargo tied up outside the base. The merchant also rented horses, so they were encouraged to consider using them if they were going somewhere far. The owner of one shop that dealt in all sorts of tents recognized that they were new to the outpost, and gave them an aggressive sales pitch for his wares.

With all of this looking around, they were starting to get hungry, so they stopped at a certain food stall to get lunch. The skewers of fried meat had a certain rustic charm to them, and the water flavored with sour fruit juice wasn't bad, either.

"I could live here," was Ranta's take on the place, and Haruhiro couldn't help but agree.

"Y'know," Yume said, with a relaxed and cheerful look on her face, "Yume, she heard earlier, there're bathhouses here, too."

"That is important," Merry nodded emphatically.

"...Yeah," Shihoru said with an incredibly serious look on her face. "If I have to go even one day without a bath... honestly, it feels gross..."

"Well, yeah, if you're a girl..." Kuzaku said idly.

"Ha! Women are such a pain!" Ranta cackled. "Me, I could go ten days, maybe a month, and not even care, you know?! Not bathing never killed anyone!"

"You say that, but if you start stinkin', you're not gonna like that much, now are you?" Yume shot back.

"What, Yume?" Ranta asked. "If you go without bathing, do you stink that much? C'mere! Let me sniff you!"

"Yume's not lettin' you sniff anythin', you idiot!" she shot back.

"Hmm?" Ranta asked. "Well, I bet you must smell pretty rank by now, then, huh?"

"Do not! Yume doesn't stink yet at all!"

"Well, let me check, and I'll give you an official judgment from a third party," said Ranta. "Besides, it's not like it's something you'd notice by yourself. You can't smell your own stink."

Merry suddenly leaned in close to Yume's neck, sniffing. "She doesn't stink," she reported.

"Hyaoh?!" It must have tickled Yume or something, because she let out a weird cry.

"Oh..." Merry moved away from Yume. "...I'm sorry."

"Mm, nuh-uh, it's nothin' to apologize for." Yume sounded slightly embarrassed for some reason. "Yume was just a little startled, that's all. But, Yume, she's glad to know she doesn't smell."

"What do you think you're doing, leaving me out of the fun?!" Ranta shouted, waving his arms around indignantly. "Let me join in, too! No, actively include me! Let me in on the action!"

Once their bellies were full, they decided it was finally time to go to the Wonder Hole. However, embarrassingly, Haruhiro and the others only knew that the entrance to the Wonder Hole was at Lonesome Field Outpost. Ranta chased down a few volunteer soldiers and tried asking, but he was brusquely turned away.

If you didn't know them and weren't paying for their drinks that night, most volunteer soldiers weren't that friendly. Haruhiro should have expected it to be like this.

"It'd be nice if there was someone I knew around here," Haruhiro said as he looked around. "...Ah."

There is, he realized.

"Oh!" It seemed Ranta had noticed, too, and he started to wave. "Heyyy! Shinohara-saaaan! What's up, man! How've you been?!"

There was a group all wearing white capes walking in their direction. The man with the gentle-looking face who was at the head of the group cast a broad smile in their direction.

Shinohara was the leader of a well-known clan called Orion, but he

was a mild-mannered fellow with a great personality. Because they were a group led by Shinohara, all of the members of Orion were friendly and well-organized. That said, Ranta's audacious behavior still made a few of them furrow their brows in consternation. Shinohara himself, however, didn't seem upset.

"Hey," the man said. "If you're here, does that mean you're finally tackling the Wonder Hole, too?"

"Yes! Siree! Bob!" Ranta shouted, making a weird salute-like gesture for no well-explained reason as he did. He was totally letting his excitement get the better of him. It was so stupid that it was embarrassing to watch. "So, Shinohara-san, you're going to the Wonder Hole, just like us?! Man, talk about a coincidence!"

"No," said Shinohara. "We're going somewhere else. We have some business to take care of at Mount Grief."

"Mount Grief..." Haruhiro murmured the words. It wasn't a familiar name, but it had an eerie ring to it. What kind of place could it be? Would Haruhiro and the others go there, too, someday?

"Oh." Shinohara looked at Kuzaku. "I don't believe I've seen you before. I'm Shinohara of Orion. Nice to meet you."

"Ohh." Kuzaku gave a slight bow of his head. "Hey. I'm Kuzaku."

"I see." Shinohara paused for a moment, closing his eyes and taking a short breath. "If I recall, you all took part in Operation Two-Headed Snake as members of Blue Snake Force, right? While there were few losses in the Frontier Army portion of Blue Snake Force, with only six dead, I've heard that twenty-three volunteer soldiers lost their lives there."

"I wasn't good enough," Merry looked Shinohara straight in the eye and told him. "I made a mistake no priest must ever make. Because of that, I let him die."

"Merry..." A man with short hair and narrow eyes started to come

forward, then stopped himself. Hayashi. The man who had once been Merry's comrade.

"And yet, you're still here." Shinohara put a hand on Merry's shoulder. "Rather than stop, you faced forward and continued to walk. You've found good comrades for yourself, Merry."

"...Yes." Merry looked down at the ground. Her back was quivering slightly.

I want to give her a hug, Haruhiro thought, and then got flustered for having thought it. *No, I don't. No way. I can't give her a hug. That's so not me.*

He didn't think that was his role. After all, there was nothing between Haruhiro and Merry.

"Er, you, too, Shinohara-san." Haruhiro cleared his throat. "Good work with the attack on Riverside Iron Fortress. I don't know any of the details, but you guys won, yeah?"

"Thanks to the work you guys did, we had a perfect victory," Shinohara said.

For a moment, it looked like a cynical smile crossed Shinohara's face. However, it only lasted an instant. It wasn't a look that was typical for Shinohara, so Haruhiro might have imagined it.

"Things went the opposite way for Red Snake Force," he continued. "The Frontier Army was dealt a painful blow, but there were very few volunteer soldiers lost. Soma's Day Breakers really carried the day. Thanks to them, we in Orion had an easy time of it."

"Man! Soma, huh!" Ranta stomped his feet and pulled at his curly hair. "Damn, that Soma's awesome! The Day Breakers, huh! Ohhh...!"

Shinohara covered his mouth and smiled. Even though it was Ranta talking, Shinohara had a look on his face like he would when

watching an innocent child.

"I hear that Soma's been operating out of this town lately," the man said. "You might just run into him somewhere."

"Ohhhh?! Seriously?! Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" Ranta shouted.

"Would you shut up already, man? Seriously..." Haruhiro sighed, then turned back to Shinohara. "—Oh, that's right. Shinohara-san, actually, there was something I wanted to ask you."

"What is it? Hopefully, I'll have an answer for you."

"Erm..." Haruhiro rubbed his cheek with one hand, looking around to each of the members of Orion. Men and women alike, they all looked back at him with calm eyes. No matter how young or old they were, they all felt like reliable older brothers and sisters.

Meanwhile, his own group—well, Ranta might be dragging down the dignity of the group all on his own, but Haruhiro, Shihoru, Yume, their junior Kuzaku, and even Merry, were all younger than the people in Orion. They gave off a feeling of being so overwhelmingly inexperienced, it was almost refreshing.

No, it wasn't refreshing at all. Actually, it was painful.

Even having come to Lonesome Field to head for the Wonder Hole was something they'd done mostly on the spur of the moment. And now that they were here, they didn't even know the most basic information, so he was about to ask Shinohara about it.

Is this really okay? Haruhiro wondered. *But, they do say that "asking is a moment of shame, but not asking is a lifetime of shame," and I'd rather not waste time.*

"...So, about the Wonder Hole, I was wondering where it is."

14. First Impression of the Hole of Surprises

The Wonder Hole.

Who had named it the Wonder Hole?

When had it become the Wonder Hole?

The Wonder Hole.

Imagine for a moment that there was a super giant mole on the Quickwind Plains. Now, this super giant mole, being a mole like any other, would of course dig tunnels. This was a super giant mole, so the tunnels it dug would be giant, too.

Imagine that this super giant mole started digging a giant tunnel around 1.5 kilometers to the north of Lonesome Field Outpost. The tunnel entrance wasn't vertical. It was diagonal.

The super giant mole had started digging a really long time ago, so the slope was covered in thick grass. How far the super giant mole's giant tunnel went, how it spread out, no one knew for certain. That labyrinthine tunnel was so ridiculously huge that some people thought it might go on forever.

Now, this was the Wonder Hole. Also called the Hole of Surprises, or the Hole of Mysteries.

According to one theory, the deepest point of the Wonder Hole was

connected to another world. They said that that was why the Wonder Hole was inhabited by bizarre and dreadful creatures seen nowhere else, and a unique ecology had formed inside it.

Furthermore, there were a number of beasts, monsters, and races that, having been defeated in the factional struggles of Grimgar, had fled into the Wonder Hole. It seemed that each of these groups had undergone their own independent growth and development.

The Wonder Hole was, of course, not a giant tunnel dug by a super giant mole. That was merely an analogy. Then how was it formed, you ask? The most persuasive theory was that a number of limestone caves, lava caves, geological fractures and ravines had been connected through a series of natural phenomena and the actions of various living creatures.

The Wonder Hole was a place of many mysteries. For many long years, people had been working to map it in its entirety, but that had yet to be accomplished. The Wonder Hole was just too vast.

In some places, it was too dangerous even for experienced explorers and well-trained volunteer soldiers. However, there was no shortage of people who went into the Wonder Hole.

The explorers were driven by the lust for adventure, walking forward again today in search of lands yet unseen. And as for the volunteer soldiers, it was well worth taking the risk.

“We’re here...” Ranta gulped. “We’re really here. It’s the Wonder Hole.”

Ranta was acting calm, by his standards. Well, that was to be expected, because this area near the entrance was kind of, well, calm and quiet.

Honestly, Haruhiro had been expecting there to be more fierce and dangerous-looking creatures waiting for them, so it was a bit of a letdown.

The Wonder Hole was easily a hundred meters across, so he did feel like, *Wow, that sure is huge,* but there were chickens, of all things, on that slope.

No, they weren't chickens. They were too fat for that. They were big and plump. At a glance, they looked bigger than a person, so these weren't just mutated chickens. Probably, they were an entirely different creature that just happened to resemble them.

Those pseudo-chickens were sitting down or walking around all over the place.

"What is this...?" Haruhiro let his honest opinion slip out.

"It's kinda..." Kuzaku narrowed his eyes. "...pastoral and idyllic, huh."

"The chickens're cute, huh," Yume said, smiling—no, smirking.

Shihoru shivered. "...But, they're a little scary."

"Yeah," Merry nodded. "They're big, but still weirdly realistic."

It was strange for her to say they were weirdly realistic, since they were living and breathing right there in front of them, and were, therefore, without a doubt, real. Still, Haruhiro sort of got what Merry wanted to say. If you took a fly or mosquito, blew it up to ten times its normal size, and you could see all the little details of it clearly, it'd be pretty grotesque. It didn't feel any better seeing that done with chickens instead. Probably, that was what she was getting at.

"Well, that's just how the Won-Ho is," Ranta said, acting like an insufferable know-it-all. "It's the sort of thing where it's pretty easy up by the entrance, and it gradually gets more hardcore from there. Like that's the design? We haven't even gone inside yet, so this is about what you'd expect."

"Fine, but what's this 'Won-Ho' supposed to be...?" Haruhiro asked.

“Huhh?! Parupiro, you moron, it’s short for Wonder Hole, duh! You ought to be able to figure out that much. Use some common sense.”

“I’m not sure a guy as far from normal as you should be talking to me about common sense...”

“Are you an idiot?” Ranta shot back. “How many people in this world do you think have as much common sense as me? Not one, man, not one. I am the King of Common Sense.”

“Man, do you even know what common sense means?” Haruhiro asked.

“Yeah, I do,” Ranta said. “The opposite of nonsense, right?”

“Oh, I give up...”

“Yeah, I bet you do! Talking to you is a waste of time anyway! Okay, let’s do this!” Ranta put on his helmet, then raced forward.

Haruhiro blinked. “...Huh? What? Man, whaa—”

“...Uwah,” Kuzaku put on his close helm and lowered its visor. “Seriously?”

“Huh...?” Yume brought her index finger to her lips, tilting her head to the side in confusion.

“...Unbelievable,” Shihoru groaned, but she still got ready to fight.

Merry shouted after him, “Stop it, you idiot!”

She was too late.

“Hahhhhhhhhhh...! Leap Out!” Ranta bellowed.

Ranta charged fiercely towards one of the giant pseudo-chickens that was sitting on the ground.

The sharp blade of Ranta's longsword caught the giant pseudo-chicken—or so he thought.

"Gyueh!" The pseudo-chicken leapt up at the last possible moment, flapping its wings.

"Bwah...?!" Ranta's swing missed, and he looked up at the pseudo-chicken.

Yes. Looked *up* at it.

"—What, you can fly?!" he shouted.

"Wugyagyagyagyagyaaa!"

The pseudo-chicken was probably beating its wings in desperation. It was currently at an altitude of about three meters. But maybe that was the limit for it. The pseudo-chicken was moving backwards in midair as it descended.

"Gwahaha! You're making this more fun than I thought it'd be!" Ranta bellowed.

Ranta closed in on the pseudo-chicken before it could land, taking a swing at it. The pseudo-chicken didn't have arms, so it went after him with its legs instead.

A kick. It was a kick.

"Gyugyagyugyagyua!" the chicken called.

"Whoa! Whoops! There!" Ranta's longsword hit the pseudo-chicken's leg. They collided. Blood flew. However, he hadn't cut it off. It looked like the pseudo-chicken had pretty tough legs.

"Not bad!" Ranta called.

"Gyueee!"

The pseudo-chicken jumped off the ground, launching another kick

at Ranta. This was different from its last midair kick. This was a strong kick with real force behind it.

"Gwuh...?!" Ranta intercepted it with his longsword, but it was pushed back. He was sent flying.

"I'm kind of supposed to be the tank!" Kuzaku called, interposing himself between the pseudo-chicken and Ranta.

"Gyugyagyagyagyah! Gyagyagyagyagyah!"

The pseudo-chicken jumped into the air and kicked. It kicked with its right leg. It kicked with its left leg. It spun its legs around, kicking again and again in rapid succession.

"Oh! Ohh! Wow! Whoa!" Kuzaku was blocking it all with his shield somehow, but he was totally being forced to back away. The pseudo-chicken might force its way past his defense and knock him over at any moment.

"Okay, Kuzaku, you're in charge of letting it whale on you!" Ranta shouted.

Ranta had let Kuzaku take his place. Now was he trying to circle around to the pseudo-chicken's side, or its back, if he was lucky?

"Haru?!" Merry looked over to Haruhiro.

Yeah, I know, Haruhiro thought. *Orders, right? You're looking for orders. I have to give them. Dammit. Screw you, Ranta. This is because you had to go and start this. I mean, what do we get out of killing some giant pseudo-chicken? Sure, we could probably eat the meat, but butchering it would be a lot of work. No, no, now's not the time to be thinking about that.*

Haruhiro quickly scanned the area around them. The other pseudo-chickens were keeping their distance and watching.

They sure are cold, these pseudo-chickens, he thought. *But for*

now, it looks like they won't be swarming us. Not yet, at least. We've gotta stay on our toes.

"Kuzaku, you stay there and hold out!" he called. "Ranta, Yume and I will surround it! Merry, look after Shihoru! Conserve magic!"

Haruhiro drew his dagger and sap and rushed forward. Ranta was already trying to get behind the pseudo-chicken.

"—No matter what, I'm gonna be the one to decide this!" Ranta hollered. "O Darkness, O Lord of Vice! Dread Aura!"

Ranta activated his dark magic, and something like a blackish purple haze enveloped him. Dread Aura. It was a spell that gave the dread knight who used it a general power boost.

Use that from the beginning! Haruhiro shouted at him mentally.

"Urkh..." Kuzaku grunted with exertion.

Kuzaku's hanging in there, Haruhiro thought. *But it's sloppy, the way he moves. Is he too tall, so it's throwing off his balance? His shield and sword are both too far out from his body, and they're not in sync; it's a mess. He's got too many gaps. Is he gonna be okay as tank like that?*

Regardless, while he'd been managing to hold out somehow, Ranta had gotten right behind the pseudo-chicken and taken a swing at it. "Hatred!"

"Gyueeh!"

The giant pseudo-chicken took to the air once more, dodging Ranta's slash. Once again, it was about three meters up, but that was high enough that Ranta's swings just barely couldn't reach it.

"Fwoosh!" Yume called, quickly loosing an arrow. Despite being a hunter, Yume wasn't good at archery. But she hit. It struck the flying pseudo-chicken in the breast.

“Yay!” Yume cheered, but the pseudo-chicken didn’t even flinch. It looked like it was pretty meaty, so one or two arrows might not hurt it much.

“Hit it in the face, okay? The face!” Ranta bellowed, chasing after the descending pseudo-chicken, swinging his sword around as he did.

Kuzaku followed after him with heavy steps.

When the pseudo-chicken landed, this time it started running.

“Gyueeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeh!”

“I-It’s running?!” Haruhiro was dumbfounded. At the same time, he thought, *This isn’t going to work. We can’t catch it. I mean, it’s fast. That thing’s super fast.*

“Hey, wait, you...!” Ranta hollered.

Ranta was trying to chase after it, but it was getting further and further away from him. Kuzaku just stood there, while Yume was nocking an arrow.

“Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart...!”

Shihoru cast a spell. It was one she had newly learned. It wasn’t Darsh Magic. It was a Falz Magic spell, Lightning.

There was a flash of light. Then a roaring sound, like the sound of tearing paper, only magnified tens or hundreds of times.

It was lightning. Lightning came down. Right at the feet of the fleeing pseudo-chicken.

In other words, she missed.

“Meow...!” Without missing a beat, Yume let her arrow fly. It didn’t even graze it.

“Dammiiiiiiiiit, aaaaahhhhhh....!” Ranta yelled.

Ranta's still running, Haruhiro thought. *It'd be stupid to go to the trouble of stopping him.*

"...I mean, when you get down to it, this was all his fault for suddenly starting a fight in the first place," Haruhiro added aloud.

"Whoa..." Kuzaku looked down at the ground, shaking his head. "I broke into a cold sweat there. I've never fought anything like that before..."

"I don't think that's your only problem here..." Haruhiro muttered, despite himself.

Kuzaku raised his visor and looked in Haruhiro's direction. "Huh?"

"Nah—" Haruhiro said.

I've got something to say to him. I feel like I really ought to say it. But, as infuriatingly stupid as it is, I can't just leave Ranta alone.

"Hey! Ranta! Get back here already! Don't waste your time!" Haruhiro shouted.

"You're so annoying! Shut up, Parapillion!" Ranta hollered.

All he'd gotten in return was some verbal abuse, but it still seemed that even Ranta had realized how stupid he was being. Or maybe he was just tired. That seemed more likely. Either way, Ranta finally stopped.

"...I'm sorry," Shihoru said, shrinking into herself. "...I couldn't hit it with my spell. I know this is just making excuses, but I'm not used to Falz Magic yet..."

"Grr," Yume said with a grimace. "That arrow hit, but it didn't end up doin' anything."

Merry had an incredibly dark look on her face, as if the world had just ended for her. She was depressed and at a loss for what to do. "...I

couldn't cast it... Protection..."

Merry's got a complex about Protection, Haruhiro thought. *This's bad.*

"Nah, it's not your fault, Merry—" he hastened to reassure her, but the source of all this trouble had turned around and was on his way back, cursing all the way.

"I almost had it, but *someone* went and stopped me! You just had to go and make a nuisance of yourself!" Ranta yelled.

"Man..." Haruhiro muttered.

The words "making a nuisance of yourself" are a better description of what you were doing, he thought indignantly. *They were made to describe what you were doing. Your very existence is a nuisance. Give me a break. Quit screwing around all the time. Seriously, you do this every time. I wish you'd just die already. I wouldn't mind—hell, I'd be thrilled.*

Haruhiro wanted to unload all of those feelings on him, but Ranta probably wouldn't change even if he did. If Haruhiro said anything, Ranta would argue back, it'd turn into a fight, and that would only be exhausting for him. Still, he had to warn him against one thing.

"No more messing with the pseudo-chickens," Haruhiro ordered. "Actually, you're banned from charging in without permission."

"Don't get cheeky with me," Ranta said. "Who do you think you are, pal?"

"It's banned."

"I asked, who do you think you are? Answer me."

"It's banned."

"Can you do anything other than repeat yourself?" Ranta

demanded. “Are you a parrot? Are you a parrot, huh? Yeah, you’re a parrot. Fine then, from now on, your name is Parrot, got it? You’d better get used to it.”

Haruhiro did his best to ignore Ranta and resist the urge to punch him. Haruhiro’s ability to let things go must have gone up a level or two.

“...I’m amazed that you can put up with him,” Kuzaku said with clear dismay.

“It’s because he’s always like this...” Shihoru explained with a wry laugh.

Yume stuck out her bottom lip, making a pouty face. “Still, when he’s doin’ stuff to make you mad, he makes you real mad.”

“Um! Everyone, gather around.” Merry raised her hand. “I’ll cast Protection on us. This time, I have to make sure it doesn’t run out...”

Haruhiro and most of the others gathered around Merry at once, but Ranta was dragging his feet.

“Oh, fine, if I have to,” Ranta muttered. “Honestly. You’re absolutely hopeless. Seriously. Seriously.”

It really made Haruhiro want to shout *Come on, just get over here already,* but he thought better of it.

“Ah,” he added, realizing something.

“Hm?” Ranta turned around. “...Oh?”

There was a rumbling sound. It was incredibly intense. Something was running towards him. It was a giant pseudo-chicken. Since it had an arrow in its breast and a bloody leg, it must have been the one from before.

The pseudo-chicken leapt into the air. “Gyueeeeeeeeeeeeeeeh!”

“Ohhhhhh?!” Ranta yelled.

It let loose.

The giant pseudo-chicken landed a flying kick on Ranta’s chest.

“Gwah?!” Ranta yelped.

It was a clean hit. Ranta was bowled over.

Haruhiro couldn’t help but think, *Serves you right.*

“O Light, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you… Protection!” When Merry cast the spell, a hexagram of light appeared on Haruhiro and the others’ left hands.

“Didn’t it run away?!” Haruhiro readied his dagger and sap. “We’ll have to do this! Kuzaku!”

“Yeah!” Kuzaku put his shield in front of him and charged at the pseudo-chicken.

Yume nocked an arrow. “Is Yume better off usin’ her machete?!”

He couldn’t shout, *I don’t know! I don’t know anything about that!* at her, like he really felt, so Haruhiro tried saying, “Your bow is fine!” But was it really? He didn’t know.

Shihoru launched another spell, but missed again. Ranta wasn’t getting up. He was just lifting his head and glancing over in Merry’s direction, as if to say, *Heal me, please. Be nice to me.* That ass.

Yume’s arrow didn’t hit it, either.

As for Kuzaku, it was all he could manage just to block the pseudo-chicken’s kicks with his shield.

The pseudo-chicken jumped, flew around, and they couldn’t catch it. This was going nowhere.

15. Bitter

—*The task set before me is clear,* Haruhiro thought.

First, something had to be done about Ranta running wild. Whenever that ass went and did whatever he felt like, without exception, it ended incredibly badly. As the party leader, Haruhiro had to do something about it. If he couldn't, it would mean he was failing to accomplish his duty. He needed to put a collar on that mad dog Ranta, and train him to do as he was told. It was going to be an extremely difficult mission, but he would have to do it.

And then there was Kuzaku.

"Well, truth be told, I've never done the tank thing before," Kuzaku had told Haruhiro. "In my last party, we had two warriors. They were kind of tank-y. I was more of a support role. You know, like, I'd stay back. I'm not used to being on the front line, you could say. Honestly, it's pretty scary."

Of course it was scary. There was no helping that. But if he didn't stand there as an immovable tank, it would make it hard for those in back to do their jobs.

For the time being, Haruhiro had decided to have Kuzaku focus on one job. Paladins had a skill, Block, which was used to stop enemy attacks. Kuzaku was to focus on using that.

Block was for more than just receiving enemy blows with his shield. By pulling back or pushing forward at the right time, he could throw

his opponent off balance, delay their next attack, or set up a counterattack combo.

According to Kuzaku, because he hadn't been a tank in his last party, he hadn't even carried a shield. He'd only learned Block recently, so he didn't have the composure to consciously make use of it in a real battle just yet. That was going to be a problem, so they'd need to beat the skill into him.

To Haruhiro's mind, Block was the most basic of basics for a paladin, a skill that could become a central pillar of their strategy. For the moment, Kuzaku didn't need to think about attacking at all. He wanted him to focus entirely on Block.

"Urkh...! Kuh! Muh...!" Kuzaku was desperately blocking the club with his shield. The one swinging the club was a squat, big-nosed, round-eyed human—no. A human-like creature.

They all seemed to have clubs, and they were all male, so Haruhiro decided to call them clubmen for now. Yes, clubmen. There was more than one clubman. In addition to Clubman A, the one Kuzaku was fighting, there were multiple others.

"Argh! Quit darting around!" Ranta hollered.

Ranta was trying to carve up Clubman B with his sword, but he couldn't pull it off. The clubmen were tiny, and pretty darn fast, too.

"They're strong, too!" Haruhiro called.

Haruhiro Swatted Clubman C's club, Swatted it, and Swatted it again.

That club, is it made of wood? he wondered. *Or is it some other material? It's hard and heavy.*

The clubmen were maybe 120 centimeters tall at most. Even with their bodies that size, they were swinging around clubs that had to be a meter long as if they were nothing, so they were really strong.

They wore nothing but these shabby outfits that were like short, one-piece dresses, tied shut at their waists. No shoes. They didn't seem to have a human-level intellect, but they'd been crafty enough to catch the party by surprise.

After Haruhiro and the others had somehow managed to kill that pseudo-chicken, they'd headed inside the Wonder Hole. They'd progressed through a huge cave that was like a one-way tunnel for some time, and then, suddenly, these guys had leapt out of a side tunnel. They had waited for Haruhiro and the party to pass, then attacked from behind.

"Sorry! Usin' the bow may not be an option! They're too tiny!" Yume called, putting her bow away and trying to draw her machete.

"Get on with it, you moron!" Ranta shouted.

"Shut up, stupid Ranta!" she yelled back.

"What'd you say?!"

"Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart...!" Shihoru chanted, triggering her Lightning spell. Her target was Clubman A, the one that was wailing on Kuzaku. Down came the lightning.

"Gyah!" the clubman screamed.

It hit. But, no, that didn't mean she scored a direct hit on Clubman A. Its club. The lightning struck Clubman A's club.

Clubman A immediately reacted by letting go of its club and jumping backwards.

"Punishment!" Kuzaku quickly stepped in, swinging his longsword down diagonally. The path of his sword resembled Moguzo's signature finishing move, the Thanks Slash, AKA Rage Blow. Because he pulled his shield in to cover half his body as he executed the slash, it left him with less of an opening, but it probably had less power. Also, perhaps because he was focusing on defending, he was

somewhat slow to use the skill.

Maybe because of that, Clubman A was able to leap back, avoiding Kuzaku's Punishment. He rolled, then picked up his club. Getting up, he started attacking Kuzaku again.

"Dammit!" Kuzaku sounded frustrated, but he didn't let his temper get the better of him.

"Don't rush things! Just keep going like you were!" Haruhiro called out to him, still going Swat, Swat, Swat. He had gotten so used to Swatting that he could Swat while focusing on something else now.

Still, I can't let myself get carried away. It's dangerous when I start thinking I've gotten used to it, he mentally cautioned himself, then riled up the mad dog. "Ranta! What're you doing?! You're letting that loser give you a hard time! Are you all talk?!"

"Snap!" Ranta lost it. He wouldn't have had it any other way. "Take that, and that, and that, and that, and thaaaaat!"

He attacked. He used Leap Out to move up, leaping forward from an angle to pressure Clubman B. Clubman B tried to knock Ranta's longsword away with his club, but he couldn't react fast enough.

"Ooghyah," the clubman cried. "Gyah. Gyahih!"

Ranta cackled, shouting, "Die, die, die, die, die, dieeeee...!" It looked like he was going to push past Clubman B's defense.

Yume went to help Kuzaku, machete in hand. Shihoru might still have been considering what to do. Merry checked her right wrist.

It's good she's checking that Protection hasn't worn off, but it feels like she's doing it too often, Haruhiro thought. *I should probably talk to her about that later.*

"It's about time I do something, too!" Haruhiro shouted.

Because he'd been Swatting so long, he'd gotten a read on Clubman C's attacks. Haruhiro knew that when he went for a combo, he repeated a pattern of right, right, left, right, right, left. Once he went right, right, left, it seemed like Haruhiro could do something in the gap between that attack and the next.

Okay, Haruhiro thought. I'll do it.

Clubman C swung his club in from the right, and Haruhiro used Swat.

Again from the right. Swat. Now, left. Swat. Next is right. Now.

"Shatter!" Haruhiro lurched forward, planting a kick on Clubman C's knee. He hadn't kicked hard enough to actually break the clubman's knee, but there was no need to. Clubman C stopped for a moment. That was enough.

"I'll finish this!" Haruhiro added.

Assault.

Haruhiro used the dagger in his right hand and the club in his left to stab and beat the hell out Clubman C. If Clubman C took a desperate swing at him with its club, Haruhiro probably wouldn't be able to dodge. He'd be taken out.

If I take a heavy blow like that, I'm not going to be able to shrug it off, Haruhiro thought. *If it hits me in the wrong spot, it could be lethal. It's terrifying. I'm so scared, my hair's standing on end. I have to overcome this fear. Even if I go down, I'll make sure he does, too. I'll take him with me.*

Clubman C fell on his backside, tossed aside his club, tried to cover his head, but couldn't protect it, eventually got on all-fours but was still being cut and bludgeoned. Finally, looking down over the motionless Clubman C, Haruhiro tried to take a deep breath.

He couldn't. Sighing was out of the question, too. Even breathing

was hard. He was sweating badly. It was getting in his eyes, and it stung. When he turned his head to look around, drops of sweat splashed around.

"I... I can only use this... on weaker enemies, huh..." he gasped.

It was too dangerous. That, and it was incredibly exhausting to use. Maybe he could use it as a last resort when he was backed into a corner, or when he had no other choice, but it wasn't going to work as a trump card. Only when he was stronger than his opponent could Assault decide the outcome of a battle. It probably couldn't turn around a losing battle.

"I-I guess... it just means... the world's not that easy, huh..." Haruhiro panted.

Ranta shouted "Chop!" and, while he didn't quite knock Clubman B's head clean off, he broke its neck halfway. Kuzaku and Yume were overwhelming Clubman A. It was just a matter of time before they won, too.

Okay, somehow we've managed to—or not. This world, it really doesn't take it easy on us.

"Merry! Shihoru! Behind us!" Haruhiro shouted. "Something's coming!"

"Huh...?!" As soon as Merry turned around, she swung her short staff sideways. The furry little creatures, shorter than the clubmen, that had been closing in on Merry and Shihoru scattered, but they looked like they might attack again.

What are those things? Haruhiro thought. *Monkeys? No. They're built more like humans than monkeys, and they don't have tails. Even their faces are covered in hair. Still, I'm hesitant to call them human. They're abnormally hairy, so "hairy monkeys" sounds about right.*

"Three of them!" Haruhiro called. "Ranta! New enemies! One each

for me, you, and Merry!"

"Sure thing!" Ranta shouted.

"Okay!" Merry called.

"Kuzaku, Yume, hurry up and finish!" Haruhiro shouted as he charged towards Hairy Monkey A.

My body feels so heavy, he thought. *Assault's no good. It tires me out twice as much in battle as it did in training. It's useless like this. Even though I paid Barbara-sensei 1 gold and 20 silver to teach it to me.*

Regardless, he was closing in on Hairy Monkey A. Hairy Monkey A swung both of its arms at him, so he went Swat, Swat. Swat.

It has claws, huh, Haruhiro thought. *They have long, sharp, hard claws. The clubmen had more power, but these hairy monkeys win when it comes to speed. Actually—isn't this thing ridiculously fast? It's really springy. Even without a run up, it slaps its hands on the ground and can leap two, three meters into the air.*

"They've got some serious jumping power! Watch out!" Haruhiro called.

"No, you watch out!" Ranta hollered.

Ranta used Exhaust and Leap Out to jump around, so his fight with Hairy Monkey B was a nonsensical mess as they both bounced around all over the place.

Merry inhaled sharply in anger. She was trying to hit Hairy Monkey C with her short staff, but it just wasn't working out for her.

"Ohm, rel, ect, nemun, darsh...!" Shihoru chanted as she drew elemental sigils with her staff. A shadow elemental flew out, fixing itself to the ground. It was positioned right in between Merry and Hairy Monkey C.

Shadow Bond.

That's our Shihoru, Haruhiro thought. *Nice work.*

"Akyah...?!" Hairy Monkey C stepped on the elemental. Its foot was now stuck. It couldn't move.

"Smash!" Merry spun her short staff around, whacking Hairy Monkey C hard in the head.

That's gotta hurt, thought Haruhiro.

Merry followed it up with a continued attack. "Hahh! Yah! Take that!"

"Agyahguhgyah!" the hairy monkey screamed.

Merry can do pretty much whatever she wants to it now, Haruhiro thought. *These hairy monkeys' main weapons are their speed and those claws, so if we can just make them stop, they aren't scary at all.*

"But, how do we make them stop?!" Haruhiro shouted aloud.

While using Swat on Hairy Monkey A's claws, Haruhiro thought about it. *Am I being too passive?* With that thought in mind, he tried attacking with his sap after a Swat. Hairy Monkey A made an exaggerated leap backwards and ran off. *How cautious.*

"Got him!" Yume shouted.

Looks like Kuzaku and Yume took out Clubman A, Haruhiro noted. *It's six-on-three. Merry's about to finish Hairy Monkey C, so soon it'll be six-on-two. We can do this. No. Maybe not...?*

"Zoowah?!" Ranta shouted.

Suddenly, Ranta started using Exhaust repeatedly.

Again? Haruhiro thought in shock.

Were they reinforcements, or not? Either way, it was more new enemies. It looked like they were coming out of a hole to the side.

Another different type of creature. Black. They looked like emaciated children with jet black skin. Their eyes were incredible. Sparkling. Like gems. In their hands they held see-through knives.

As for whether they were enemy reinforcements—it didn't look like it. Those gem kids ganged up on Hairy Monkey B, the one Ranta had been fighting, knocked it down, stabbed the hell out of it, then carried on with that momentum to attack Ranta. It looked like the gem kids and the hairy monkeys didn't get along. Still, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" didn't seem to apply here, because the gem kids seemed hostile to humans, too.

When Hairy Monkey A which Haruhiro had been fighting spotted the gem kids, it took off somewhere else. Thanks to that, Haruhiro was freed up, but... wasn't this kind of bad? No, not kind of, wasn't it really bad?

"H-H-H-Heyyyy! H-H-Help! Guys! Hurry up and come help me already, you morons!" Ranta shouted.

If nothing else, the number of gem kids chasing after Ranta was bad news.

Haruhiro counted them on his fingers. "One, two, three..."

Eight. No, nine. No, no, there are ten.

"They've got us outnumbered!" Haruhiro shouted.

For a moment, he seriously considered sacrificing Ranta to save the rest of them.

Guess I can't do that though, he thought. *Well, of course not. But what do I do?*

Haruhiro shouted, "Ranta! We're turning back! Towards the

entrance! We'll cut down on the number of enemies somehow and run away! Shihoru...!"

"Right!" Shihoru immediately cast a spell. "Jess, yeen, sark, kart, fram, dart...!"

It was... not Lightning. The chant was similar, but it was a different spell.

A flash of light. Rumbling. Lightning fell. No, a bundle of lightning might have been a better way to describe it. Right in the middle of the gem kids that were chasing Ranta—was sadly not what happened. Still, three of the gem kids were struck by lightning and blown away. That made the remaining gem kids who weren't struck falter a little, and the gap between them and Ranta widened.

"Wahahah! Nice, Shihoruuuu!" Ranta hollered. "Give 'em another one! Let 'em have it!"

"Sorry." Shihoru staggered, clinging to her staff. "...I-I don't have the magical power. Until I meditate, I can't do any more..."

"What'd you say?!" Ranta screamed.

"Meow!" Yume let an arrow fly. But it didn't hit a gem kid—it grazed Ranta's head instead.

"—Gwuh?!" Ranta shouted. "Th-That's dangerous, Yume! You...!"

"Meow," Yume complained. "It's not easy when you're all movin'."

"Ranta-kun! Over here!" Kuzaku lifted his longsword, waving to him. While Ranta was still adjusting his course and had the gem kids in tow, Kuzaku had predicted the route he was trying to take.

Ranta cackled. "You're surprisingly useful, tank! Here I goooooooooo...!"

"—Gahh!" Kuzaku hid himself behind his shield and slammed into

the gem kids. Two or three of them were knocked flying and fell to the ground, but Kuzaku had put a little too much energy into it and he tripped.

When Ranta saw that... "Screech!" Ranta pulled to a sudden stop and turned back. "Take that, and that, and that! Get massacred by me, you pissants! Dieeeee...!"

Because Ranta suddenly turned around and went on the offensive, the gem kids seemed bewildered.

No, but still... Haruhiro thought.

"That's reckless!" he yelled. "Just think about the number of enemies!"

Even as Haruhiro was saying that, he got behind one of the gem kids and hit him with a Backstab. The gem kids were closer to humans than the clubmen or hairy monkeys, so it was easier to imagine where their vital points were. Well, he wouldn't know if they were actually vital points or not until he tried, so that's what he did.

To be precise, he went for the kidney and liver. If he was stabbed through the kidney and liver, the gem kid would be wracked with unbearable pain. From there, there would be a blood spurt. On top of that, if it damaged the diaphragm, the gem kid would have major breathing difficulties. Even if he didn't die immediately, the symptoms of shock would set in, he would be unable to move, and he'd eventually breathe his last.

He's gone. The gem kid collapsed and Haruhiro began taking aim at his next target.

All of a sudden, Ranta turned heel and took off running again. "You dumbass! Like we can do this, you stupid, idiotic, moron!"

Two or three gem kids went after Ranta, the rest came at Haruhiro.

"—Huh?! Seriously?!" Haruhiro shouted.

With a cry, Kuzaku leapt to his feet, knocking back one of the gem kids' knives with his shield. Haruhiro was grateful for that, but the ones Kuzaku had knocked flying before were getting up, and at least one of the gem kids Shihoru had scattered with her magic was trying to return to the front line, too.

"Contact Shot, meow!" Yume rushed in, firing an arrow into a gem kid's face at point blank range. It was much harder to fire at an enemy while getting up close to them, or having them get up close to you. Yume pulled it off, but the arrow just went in the gem kid's mouth and shot through his left cheek. She couldn't neutralize them like that. Yume gave up on firing a second arrow, tossed her bow, and pulled out her machete.

"This is bad..." Haruhiro muttered as he Swatted, Swatted, and Swatted again. He wasn't up against one gem kid, but two. If it was just one, he might have been able to keep track of the situation around him, but that wasn't going to be possible with two.

Either way, things are a mess, he thought. *I'm not in control of the battlefield. I don't think I can do it, either.*

He wanted to scream, *Help us, please!* Of course, no one was going to help them. He knew that. They had to do something about it themselves. They had to carve a path out of here. If they couldn't, they'd die. They'd become ash and bones, and soon enough no one would even remember them.

It wasn't just Haruhiro and his group. Manato and Moguzo, who'd passed on before them, and Choco and her group, Kuzaku's former comrades... there would be no one to remember them, either.

"—This isn't funny!" Haruhiro screamed.

16. Crossroads

It really wasn't funny.

Haruhiro and the others had narrowly managed to flee back to Lonesome Field Outpost with their lives, and they bought cheap tents from the merchant selling them in the back streets.

It went without saying that they'd bought separate tents for the guys and the girls. Ranta had spouted some nonsense about how they should buy a single big tent and all sleep together in one happy pile, but nobody had agreed.

After that, they'd gotten something to eat and the girls had headed off to the bathhouse. The guys were put off by the higher-than-expected cost of entry, and they made the logical decision to wait and see if they stank the next day, and if so, bathe then. Then they went to lie down early in their tent next to the outpost.

As might have been expected, three guys were a tight fit in one tent. For starters, while Haruhiro and Ranta were compact, by guy standards, Kuzaku was too tall. To engage in a bit of hyperbole, he took up the space of two people. Three guys who hadn't bathed, packed into a tight space together until morning. This was no laughing matter.

Maybe it wasn't too late to go bathe now. That, or buy a different tent. But, would that greedy tent merchant let them return this one?

Why didn't I buy a bigger one to begin with? Haruhiro wondered. *I*

had the money, but being poor's made me naturally frugal. I can't help but cheap out.

Ranta's already snoring, but is it okay to sleep? Aren't there things we should be doing? Like reflecting on today?

Technically, they had talked during dinner about how they couldn't go on like this, but everyone had been exhausted, and it hadn't been an atmosphere where they could really debate anything. Haruhiro, to be honest, was thoroughly exhausted, like he'd done enough for today, and he wanted to leave it until tomorrow.

But it's not okay, he thought. *Not okay at all.*

"...Kuzaku, you awake?" he asked.

"Yeah. Sorta."

"How was it?" Haruhiro asked.

"How was what?"

"Now that you've tried it," Haruhiro said.

"...It was tough," Kuzaku said.

"Do you know why it was tough?" Haruhiro asked.

"Oh. Hmm. It just sort of was."

"That's no good..." Haruhiro mumbled.

Kuzaku wasn't the only one who was no good. Haruhiro was, too. He wanted to put all the blame on Kuzaku and Ranta, even though it wasn't their fault. There weren't just one or two problems—there were a whole host of them. Those problems interacted in complex ways, leading things in a worse direction.

"I'm no good, I know." Kuzaku tried to roll over, but stopped, probably because it was too tight in the tent. "But, in a way, weird as

it is to say this, it was fun, I guess."

"Huh?" Haruhiro asked.

"I may not seem it, but I'm taking this seriously, you know," Kuzaku said. "I probably wasn't before. I dunno. It makes it feel worth it? Maybe that's it."

"...I see," Haruhiro said.

"Here's hoping I won't die," said Kuzaku. "That none of us will, ever again."

"Yeah," Haruhiro agreed.

"It's kind of on me to prevent it, huh?" Kuzaku asked.

"That's what makes it so tough," Haruhiro said. "Being the tank, I mean."

"Being the leader, too, I'll bet."

Haruhiro didn't respond.

Kuzaku's probably not a bad guy. I don't really know yet, though, he thought. *He's been blessed with a good physique, and he has a decent amount of physical strength. But he's not able to maneuver well. He doesn't have Moguzo's finesse, or his attention to detail. He doesn't seem that tenacious, either. He lacks a strong core, you could say. He's shaky and unreliable.*

—This is no good. It's really no good. I can't help but compare him to Moguzo. Kuzaku's not Moguzo.

"You should do this," or "You should do that"—like, "You're opening yourself too wide," or maybe "You need to lower your hips more"—there were plenty of things like that Haruhiro could have told him. But how applicable would the things be that Haruhiro, a thief, mentioned? Kuzaku must have been thinking things through himself,

and it was best to leave the fine details to him to figure out. If someone started lecturing him on how to move as a thief, Haruhiro would probably think, *What the hell do you know, anyway?* He hadn't known Kuzaku long, so he couldn't predict his reactions. He didn't know what it was okay to say and what would just make things worse. He was still getting a feel for that.

What a pain. I'm starting to feel sleepy, he thought, and soon his consciousness had sunk into the darkness.

When he awoke, maybe not mentally, but physically, he felt better. It looked like everyone just left their tents out, so Haruhiro and company did the same. So long as they didn't leave their belongings behind, too, nobody was going to bother stealing a cheap tent. They got breakfast in the back streets of the outpost, and now it was time for another fine day in the Wonder Hole.

With a little research the day before, he'd found out that the pseudo-chickens were creatures called melruks. The clubmen were duergar. The hairy monkeys were bogies. The gem kids were spriggans.

These three races that inhabited the area just inside the Wonder Hole were known as the three demi-humans. The three demi-humans were all mutually hostile, and they would kill each other on sight, but their greatest enemy was humans.

However, they wouldn't touch humans that looked strong. In other words, the three demi-humans had judged Haruhiro's group to be weak.

Of the three demi-humans, spriggans, or rather their gem-like eyes, sold for a good price. Sometimes, they were hunted to near extinction for them. That said, very few volunteer soldiers could be bothered to focus on the three demi-humans.

The demi-humans hunted melruks in groups, or captured other demi-humans and ate their meat, somehow managing to survive on

that. They were, without a doubt, the weakest creatures in the Wonder Hole. If they were able to keep the party from advancing, this whole endeavor was going to be a nonstarter.

Put another way, the area inhabited by the three demi-humans was like the first barrier to any volunteer soldier looking to make their fortune in the Wonder Hole.

"But...!" Haruhiro added aloud.

While Swatting Duergar A's club, Haruhiro checked what his comrades were doing. Kuzaku was focused on blocking Duergar B's club with his shield, while Ranta was running circles around Duergar C. Yume was trading blows with Duergar D using her machete, and even Merry was fighting a Duergar E. It was a fight they could just barely handle. Like the day before, the three demi-humans had taken Haruhiro and his group for weaklings again today, and they'd gotten into a situation like this in no time. Breaking past the first barrier wouldn't be easy.

"Ranta, just kill that one already!" Haruhiro shouted. "Someone needs to protect Shihoru!"

"Shove off!" Ranta hollered. "I know that! You don't have to tell me, pal! Here it comes! My super move! Invincible Exploding Slashhhhhh...!"

When Ranta stopped and started swinging away at Duergar C, the duergar quickly leapt backward to put some distance between them.

That duergar's much calmer than Ranta, Haruhiro thought. *Actually, it's just that Ranta's way too stupid.*

Kuzaku was focused entirely on defense, so he wouldn't be throwing Duergar B off balance any time soon.

Even if he can't beat them, it'd be easier if he could do like Moguzo and take on not just one, but two or more by himself sometimes, Haruhiro thought regretfully. *How did Moguzo do that, again...?*

Merry and Duergar E were evenly matched. Yume was struggling a little against Duergar D.

Is it just me, or is Duergar D kind of bigger than the other duergar? Haruhiro wondered.

He wasn't imagining it. That one was clearly a full size larger than the rest. It was that much stronger as a result. If he had noticed from the beginning, he could have had Kuzaku or Ranta handle Duergar D. This had been a mistake on Haruhiro's part.

It looks like Shihoru's looking for an opening to use her magic, but, right now, if enemy reinforcements, or bogies or spriggans, turn up, we're in serious trouble, Haruhiro thought. *It's up to me. I have to do it.*

Moguzo, the one they had been fully reliant on for both offense and defense, was gone now. Ranta sometimes showed bursts of strength, but he wasn't stable. They couldn't rely on him. Shihoru was trying to acquire some firepower, but she wasn't used to it yet, and it was only once a mage's safety was secured that they could dominate enemies with their powerful magic.

Just being a leader wasn't enough. Haruhiro had to become a genuine asset in combat, too.

Haruhiro used Swat on Duergar A's club, then immediately stepped in and stomped on the duergar's knee. Shatter.

"Gugyah!" the duergar howled.

For an instant, Duergar A stopped, and in that time Haruhiro slipped past him. With a backhand grip on the dagger in his right hand, he jabbed it into Duergar A's neck, following that up with a whack to the back of the head with his sap.

Haruhiro rushed over to Shihoru. "Shihoru! I'll protect you, so cast a spell!"

“Right!” Shihoru responded eagerly, immediately beginning to chant a spell. “Ohm, rel, ect, nemun, darsh...!”

A shadow elemental flew forth. It attached itself to the ground right behind Duergar D.

“Diagonal Cross!” Yume attacked, causing Duergar D to take a step back. Its right foot landed on the shadow elemental. Shihoru’s targeting for stuff like this was exquisite. Duergar D couldn’t move.

Knowing it was now or never, Yume pressed the attack, but Duergar D fended her off with his club. He was a stubborn one.

“Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart...!” That’s when Shihoru slammed a Lightning spell into him.

Shihoru had some trouble with the accuracy of her Falz Magic at the moment, but she didn’t miss a stationary opponent. Duergar D took a clean hit from the lightning, his entire body jolting and convulsing. If his right foot hadn’t been glued to the shadow elemental, the shock might have sent him flying. It didn’t look like it had killed him, but he’d probably lost consciousness.

“Ooh-hah! Take that!” Yume cut Duergar D up with her machete.

Duergar D’s done, Haruhiro thought. *Now there are three left.*

“—is something I’m not thinking, okay?!” he added aloud.

That was what he had to tell himself, because here they were. They were coming. The hairy monkeys known as bogies. Out of a nearby tunnel.

A thought occurred to Haruhiro. *It’s the same order as yesterday. That means the spriggans’ll be next, huh? At least, we should be prepared for them. We can sell spriggan eyes. They’re good money.*

Using that thought to motivate himself, first he would have to deal with the remaining three duergar and three—no, four bogies.

Uwah, Haruhiro thought in dismay. *That's seven people in total. That's more than we've got. Maybe we ought to run...?*

"Ha! Anger! How do you like that, huh?!" Ranta ran Duergar C through and killed him.

"Jess, yeen, sark, kart, fram, dart...!" Shihoru chanted.

Shihoru's magic burst forth. Not Lightning, but the higher-grade version of it, Thunderstorm. Her target was the bogies.

There was a pretty incredible thunderclap, and two of the bogies were blown away. It looked like it was close to a direct hit, so those two probably wouldn't be getting up. Kuzaku was taking Duergar B and Merry was taking Duergar E, while the new enemies were Bogie A and Bogie B. If it was four in total, they could take them out.

No, that wasn't the issue. Could they finish them off *quickly?* That was the key thing.

"Yume! Switch with Merry!" Haruhiro shouted.

"Meeeow!" Yume cried.

"Ranta, we're taking out the bogies!" Haruhiro shouted.

"Gwahahaha! I can do that myself, man!"

"Yeah, I wish!" Haruhiro shot back. "Merry, watch Shihoru! Shihoru, meditate if you can!"

"Okay!" Merry called.

"R-Roger...!" Shihoru added.

Yume quickly swapped out with Merry, while Merry put herself in a position to guard Shihoru. Ranta charged headlong towards Bogie A. Haruhiro's opponent was Bogie B.

He had his uncertainties. He was so scared, he couldn't help

himself. He couldn't dwell on it, he knew that, but the thought always came to mind, *If only Moguzo were here.*

But, when Manato had been there at first, when Merry had joined, and when Moguzo had been with them, the things that Haruhiro and the others had built during those times hadn't all been reduced to nothing. The teamwork between Haruhiro, Ranta, Yume, Shihoru, Merry, while it may not have been complete, had reached a level where they could communicate everything they needed to with eye contact and maybe a few words. Their individual strength had also risen considerably.

If they got overconfident, they would fail, but they needed to have self-confidence. To believe in themselves. Just enough not to be timid. That would be difficult, but they had to do it.

We can do it, Haruhiro thought.

These duergar and bogies, lacking any real equipment, were no match for Haruhiro and the others. The one thing they had to watch out for was their numbers. They had to divvy them up well, and swiftly go about reducing them.

We ought to be able to do this, Haruhiro thought.

"It's a race, Ranta!" he called.

"You're on!" Ranta shouted.

What they were racing for went without saying: to see who could kill their bogie the fastest.

"Leap Out!" Ranta zoomed off on a diagonal, instantly landing in front of Bogie A. Then he swung his longsword like a scythe. The top half of Bogie A's head was lopped off. "Mwahaha! I win, Parupiroooo! Be my slave from today on!"

"I never agreed to those terms!" Haruhiro deliberately chose not to attack Bogie B, instead going on the defensive and using Swat on its

claws as it attacked.

Ranta circled around behind Bogie B. “Chestooo...!”

His longsword carved into Bogie B, the back of his head this time. Bogie B was mowed down.

“Gwah ha ha!” Ranta laughed. “Damn, I’m stroooong! I’m the strongest! Parupiro’s weak! Peh!”

Haruhiro was pissed off enough he couldn’t restrain himself from clicking his tongue in displeasure. Still, it was just as planned. So long as he took the necessary precautions and used him well, Ranta was an asset.

“Haru...!” Merry cried.

“I know!” he shouted back.

When he looked over, there were spriggans popping out of another tunnel. This was within expectations. The problem was the number of them.

“Five... six, huh?” Haruhiro yelped in alarm. “Shihoru?!”

“I can go once more!” she cried.

“Okay! I’ll leave the timing to you!” he shouted.

“Right!”

“Ranta, don’t run out yet!” Haruhiro added. “You’ll get your turn soon!”

“Sure thing!” Ranta hollered. “After all, I’m the star player on this team!”

Haruhiro peeked over at Kuzaku and Yume. As Yume shouted “Chaaa...!” and cut down Duergar E, Kuzaku was still using the Block skill with his shield to defend against Duergar B’s attacks.

No, I know I said to focus entirely on doing that, but isn't he still taking way too long...? Haruhiro thought.

"Jess, yeen, sark, kart, fram, dart...!"

Shihoru cast Thunderstorm. The moment that bundle of lightning came down, the spriggans scattered. Even though they did, one of them failed to evade it and was blasted away.

"...Sorry!" Shihoru called.

"Don't worry about it!" Haruhiro called back,

While consoling Shihoru, Haruhiro thought, *Five. Five of them, huh. Damn. If Kuzaku had hurried up and killed Duergar B faster, we'd be able to support this number. Do we run? It's a hard call. I don't have time to be indecisive, though. The spriggans are almost on top of us.*

"Everyone, defend Shihoru to the death!" Haruhiro called. "I'll take them down one by one!"

Is it okay? he wondered. *Saying something like that? Isn't this plan kind of bad? I dunno. But I can't take it back now. I don't have the time.*

"A man looks coolest when he's defending a woman!" Haruhiro added. "Ranta! Show us how manly you are!"

"Damn straight I'll do it, you moron! Leave it to me!" Ranta hollered.

Ranta, Merry, and Yume each readied their weapons and surrounded Shihoru.

The spriggans surged towards them. Ranta and the others focused on a defensive fight, not breaking formation even when it turned into a melee. Just one of them, Haruhiro, dashed out from inside the spriggans' weak encirclement.

Changing direction, he targeted the spriggans from behind. *That guy. The one attacking Merry.*

Rather than Backstab, Haruhiro chose the more guaranteed kill of Spider. He grappled the spriggan from behind, stabbed it through the kidney, then slit its throat from ear to ear.

When one was dead, the other spriggans swarmed towards Haruhiro.

"—Oh, crap!" Haruhiro shouted.

"Nice decoy work, Piropiroooo!" Ranta took that opportunity to take a slash at one spriggan's back.

Too shallow. It wasn't a fatal blow, but now the spriggans couldn't focus entirely on Haruhiro.

Two spriggans closed in on Haruhiro, A and B, while Spriggan C went for Ranta and Spriggan D went for Yume. Thanks to that, things were slightly easier on Haruhiro, but it was still two-on-one. This was going to be tough.

"I've got this!" Merry cried, and with a sharp jab of her short staff, she kept Spriggan B in check. Spriggan B spun to avoid the short staff and turned to face Merry. Merry had successfully pulled Spriggan B away from Haruhiro. Now Haruhiro could focus solely on Spriggan A.

Haruhiro couldn't carry out his plan of killing them *one by one,* but there were four one-on-one matches now. It might not be the best outcome, but it was one of the better ones. Shihoru was likely exhausted from using her magic power, but even if they didn't rely on her spells, each time one of them took down a spriggan, things would swing further in their favor.

While using Swat on Spriggan A's knife, Haruhiro couldn't help but think, *It really is Kuzaku. I can't blame him, I guess. He only just joined the party. He hasn't been a volunteer soldier for that long,*

either.

Haruhiro and the others had been pretty awful themselves when they'd started out. They might not be anything special now, but they'd been much worse before.

When I think back to how we were back then, I can't make fun of Kuzaku, Haruhiro thought. *No, I wasn't making fun of him. For now, I'll just have to have him do the best he can.*

But, still, I dunno that it's okay for him to have been evenly matched with Duergar B for so long. I mean, we're in a battle with time here.

"—Ah! They're here, huh!" Haruhiro shouted.

That was a close one.

Haruhiro nearly failed to Swat Spriggan A's knife. He was panicking. Of course he was.

More spriggans had just come out from yet another tunnel. He wasn't sure how many. Somewhere between three and five, maybe. Shihoru probably couldn't use Thunderstorm again.

This is not good, he thought.

"Or rather, it's impossible!" he shouted.

We have no choice but to run.

"Everyone...!"

"Ohhhhhhhhhh...! Hatred...!" Ranta cut down Spriggan C, then charged at the new spriggans.

"Huh?! Man, what are you—Urkh...!"

Haruhiro nearly failed his Swat again. He was losing his mind badly enough as it was. He wished Ranta wouldn't make things

worse.

"Ranta?!" he shouted.

"Tough it out, Haruhiro!" Ranta acted like he was going to charge into the new spriggans, but then he used Exhaust to zoom backwards and run away. The spriggans chased after Ranta. "If we back down here, it'll be the same thing over and over! I'll buy you time! We're gonna murder all of these guys!"

"That's not...!" Haruhiro burst out.

Pride, willpower, guts, all of those things are important, yes, Haruhiro thought, gritting his teeth as he used Swat on Spriggan A's dagger again and again. *But, no matter how we strain ourselves, we're not going to be able to do things we can't do.*

"Ohm, rel, ect, nemun, darsh...!"

Shihoru's shadow elemental flew forth, attaching itself to the ground and stopping one of the new spriggans in his tracks. However, it wasn't nearly enough to make a difference.

Ranta was using Exhaust to its fullest, somehow dragging the spriggans around after him, but he'd run out of steam eventually. Now that it had come to this, it would be hard to retreat without abandoning Ranta. They'd have to accept the situation for what it was and go all-out.

"Wa ha ha!"

Haruhiro heard someone laugh. That voice wasn't one of his comrades. Who was it...?

He looked and saw a volunteer soldier in tough-looking equipment walking along at a leisurely pace. He might have been fifteen meters from Haruhiro and the others, not far at all. Despite that, why did those people look so calm?

Because they actually are calm, I guess, he thought.

"Ohh. Look at them go at it," one soldier said pityingly.

"Wa ha ha," the next laughed. "Good luck."

"When you're at the level that those guys'll attack you, it's tough," the first one agreed.

"Well, it's a stage everyone goes through, you know?" a third one pointed out.

"Nah, when we first came, they never attacked us, remember?" said the first one.

"Yeah, yeah," the second agreed. "They didn't."

"Now that you mention it, you're right!" the third one cried.

In fact, the spriggans didn't even turn an eye towards that party.

Four men, and two women. Their composition is two warriors and a paladin, a mage, a priest, and a thief, Haruhiro thought.

Even at a glance, it was plain to see. From the quality of their equipment and their overall demeanor, they were nothing like Haruhiro and his group. Without a doubt, that party was stronger than Haruhiro's.

If they could get that good, the three demi-human groups wouldn't try to lay a hand on them. They could walk right through here.

"You could help us out, y'know!" Yume complained loudly.

You can say that again, thought Haruhiro. Haruhiro and his party were fighting a hard battle and were in serious trouble. The other party should have seen that, so it wouldn't have killed them to help out a little. If Haruhiro had been in their shoes, he'd have at least called out, *Are you okay? Should we help?* As a fellow human being, he'd want to do at least that much.

I mean, isn't that what you ought to do? he thought. *But, these guys, what's wrong with them? They've wandered off while having a pleasant chat. Are they sane? Are they even human? They didn't look particularly cruel and evil. Well, maybe they looked relatively normal, but they're actually a band of inhuman monsters...?*

It's a rough world.

You can only trust your comrades. Don't count on anyone else. Because you can't. We'll have to get out of this by ourselves. In order to survive, our only option is to carve out our own path.

"I'll do it!" he called.

He needed to cool his head. He understood that, but he couldn't help but get a little hot under the collar.

Haruhiro hit Spriggan A's knife with a hard Swat, then *flipped a switch*. No, there wasn't an actual switch anywhere to flip, it meant that he consciously changed the mode he was in, like flipping a switch.

"Assault!"

He attacked like crazy with his dagger and sap. However, he stopped after the fourth sequential strike. Spriggan A looked at him with a, *Huh...?* look on his face.

Now. Haruhiro dashed past Spriggan A, whacking him in the back of the head with his sap as he passed. He then jammed his dagger into the staggering spriggan's neck.

"Merry!" Haruhiro shouted from his diaphragm, causing Spriggan B, the one Merry was fighting, to look his way.

Merry swiftly swept Spriggan B's legs out from under him with her short staff. Spriggan B fell. On his back.

Haruhiro leapt on Spriggan B's back as he tried to rise. He took a

cut to his arm, or somewhere near there, but that was no big deal. Haruhiro jammed his dagger under Spriggan B's jaw. He then slashed his throat wide open. Spider. Spriggan B died.

"Haru! Your injury!" Merry cried.

"It can wait!" he called back. "First...!"

I'm on a roll. I'm scared that I might get carried away, but it would be a shame to cool down and lose the momentum I've got going. Maybe I should go as far as I can, to almost the limit, without going over? I feel like I might be able to grasp something. Like I might be able to take the next step up.

"Punishment!" Kuzaku finally got around to slamming his longsword into Duergar B's brainpan.

Good. Good, good, good! Haruhiro traded glances with Yume. Yume seemed to get what he wanted.

With a grunt, Yume cried, "Comboooo...!"

Yume unleashed a somewhat forced combo using Brush Clearer and Diagonal Cross, causing Spriggan D to back down a bit. However, she hadn't been taking advantage of an opening, so Yume ended up throwing herself off balance a bit. It was dangerous, but that was fine.

It's been a while, thought Haruhiro.

He saw that line. That faint line of light.

Rather than him tracing the line, it was more like his body followed it on its own. The dagger didn't so much stab in as slide into place. Haruhiro landed a Backstab on Spriggan D, snuffing his life out in a single stroke.

We're in top shape, he thought. *We can do this. Things're going our way.*

"Yume, and you, too, Kuzaku! We're going! We'll get Ranta—"

Whoa. Haruhiro felt dizzy, the strength draining out of his legs. *We can do this? How? How is this being able to do it? Going our way? Oh, something's heading our way all right. More enemies.*

Duergar from the left tunnel. Bogies from the right.

The three types of demi-humans don't get along. We should make them fight each other. That idea occurred to him, but he couldn't think of a specific way to do it. *No matter how I look at it, running's the only option here. But , then, what do I do about Ranta? I dunno. Honestly, I can't decide.*

"Merry, Shihoru! Run for it!" he yelled. "Yume, you too! Kuzaku...!"

Haruhiro looked to Kuzaku. Kuzaku was raising the visor on his helmet.

Kuzaku's shoulders were heaving with each breath, but he met Haruhiro's gaze and nodded.

Yeah, at times like this, this is how it goes, Haruhiro thought. *This is how it always goes, doesn't it? Not because we want to show off—it just happens this way naturally.*

He didn't hear Yume, Shihoru or Merry's responses. Haruhiro rushed towards the bogies, and Kuzaku charged at the duergar.

Ohh, Haruhiro wanted to moan. *I'm so scared, I want to cry. The numbers, they're seriously bad news. How many bogies are there? I can't get a quick count. What the hell? Seriously, what the hell? I'm gonna die. This is it. I am so going to die. If I charge straight in like this, they'll mince me in an instant. This is no good. I need to buy even a little time. I know.*

He was scared, so scared that his every hair was standing on end, but he drew them in, further and further. In another step, probably,

the bogies would spring on him.

That was where he made a sudden turn. He couldn't do a full one-eighty, but he banked about a hundred degrees or so to the left.

Haruhiro ran. With everything he had. The bogies were biting at his heels and raising an ungodly racket. He wasn't going to be able to lose them. For another second or two, he had to run around—

"Meow...!"

Yume. Why was Yume in front of Haruhiro?

The arrow she fired whizzed past Haruhiro's face, and may or may not have hit a bogie. He couldn't check without looking back, and if he looked back he was sure they'd catch up to him, so he couldn't check.

"Yume, why?!" he shouted.

"Did you think we could run away?!" Yume let off another arrow, then took off running alongside Haruhiro. There were tears streaming down her face. "Runnin' away and leavin' you guys behind! There's no way we coulda done that!"

Well, no, maybe not, Haruhiro thought. *But—wait, it's not just Yume? Yeah. They're here.*

Over by Kuzaku, who was surrounded by duergar and taking a beating, were Merry and Shihoru. Kuzaku was desperately protecting himself with his longsword and shield, still just barely managing to stay on his feet. As for Ranta, who was still being chased around by the spriggans, there was no telling how much longer he'd last.

We'll be wiped out, Haruhiro thought. *We can struggle all we want, but we'll get wiped out. All of us are going to die here.*

Sorry, Moguzo. I know it's like, what am I apologizing for, right? Just, sorry. We shouldn't be following after you so soon. Dammit.

Dammit! Dammit...!

"No!" Haruhiro screamed.

What good will shouting that do? What will it change?

"I don't want to die!"

There was nothing he could do. Nothing any of them could do. No one in the group, least of all Haruhiro himself, had the power.

So, whether they wanted to or not, they were going to die here. They would die, leaving nothing behind. If no one was kind enough to burn them, they'd turn into zombies. When their flesh rotted and fell from their bones, they'd become skeletons. This was the worst.

"Augh!" Yume shouted.

One of the bogies had slashed Yume's leg with its claws. Yume fell behind. She was going down.

This is the place, Haruhiro thought.

He had to flip his switch. He knew it was futile. But dying without doing anything, that would just be awkward. At the very least, he'd give it everything he had. Haruhiro changed to a new mode.

"Assault!"

I don't care if I die. I mean, I'm gonna, anyway. The bogies. How many are there? Eight? Nine? More than ten? Who gives a damn?

Haruhiro closed in on the bogies that were about to pounce on Yume. He cut them with his dagger. Whacked them with his sap. He cut and whacked and cut and stabbed and whacked and cut and whacked and stabbed any that he could get his hands on.

For a moment, the bogies were intimidated by Haruhiro, but they quickly launched a counterattack. The bogies' claws dug into Haruhiro. In no time, Haruhiro was a mess of injuries. He didn't care

—Haruhiro attacked with abandon. If he stopped, it was over. He refused to stop before he was dead.

Yume kept firing arrows at point blank range. With each arrow she fired, Yume screamed.

Suddenly, his field of vision was cut in half. It looked like they had gotten one of his eyes. He couldn't swing his sap anymore. His left arm stopped moving.

It was hard to breathe—actually, he couldn't breathe properly.

Yume took a knee. She was swinging an arrow around blindly. One bogie circled around behind her.

I'm not letting you take her! Haruhiro tried to take a swing at that bogie. Right after he did, he felt impacts all over his body, and the next thing he knew, he was lying on the ground. Yume was on top of him. Was she trying to cover him?

Stop that, he tried to say. He had no voice. *—This is it, huh.*

Was this as far as he went? The bogies' claws tore into Yume's flesh, and she let out a scream.

Stop it, Haruhiro thought. *She's just a girl, damn it.*

But his body wouldn't move. It broke his heart. He had already resigned himself. But, at the very least...

Haruhiro worked up the last of his strength and hugged Yume close.

Haru-kun, she called his name.

He turned her over, facing her downwards. At least, he tried.

"Ha—"

What? Haruhiro thought numbly. *What happened?*

The bogies, they've stopped attacking.

They couldn't possibly attack now. That was because...

All at once, there was a splatter of blood from the bogies. All of them, at once. That was impossible. But, in Haruhiro's eyes, it appeared instantaneous.

The bogies doubled over and collapsed. They fell on Haruhiro and Yume, too. When they fell on top of Haruhiro, of course it hurt. But, more than that, he was utterly amazed.

What is this? he thought. *What's happening? I don't get it.*

Yume mumbled something next to his ear. Yume's face was right next to Haruhiro's face. Actually, they were touching.

"Are you okay?" he heard a man's voice say.

A man? Haruhiro thought. *Who? And, wait, does this mean...*

"...We're... saved...?" he croaked.

"Meow...?" Yume asked tentatively.

"Just wait," the voice said.

Haruhiro finally saw the man. *You're kidding me,* he thought. He couldn't believe it.

The man moved aside the bogie corpses, first helping Yume, then Haruhiro up.

It seemed it wasn't a joke or a dream. Haruhiro couldn't believe it, but he was going to have to.

The man still looked young and he wore a cool suit of black armor that fit him tightly, but which looked light to wear. There was orange light leaking out from inside it here and there. The asymmetrical skirt-like piece he wore to protect his lower half was cool, too. The

long blade he wore over his back was cool, and so was the shorter blade on his hip. His face was cool, too. He wasn't particularly beautiful, but the way his almond eyes were full of composure, intensity, and sorrow was cool. Anyway, he was cool, or rather, insanely cool. Way too insanely cool.

This man was the strongest volunteer soldier.

The most famous volunteer soldier.

"...Soma-san?" Haruhiro asked, without having meant to. The answer was obvious.

"Hm?" Soma blinked. "Do you know me?"

"...No, of course I know you... but—wait, what about everyone else?!" Haruhiro suddenly cried, looking around hurriedly. It was already over.

The duergar that had been clobbering Kuzaku had been wiped out by a beautiful young elf woman with silver hair, eyes like sapphires, and skin as white as the snow, as well as a man with awfully long arms who wore a mask and strange armor that covered his entire body.

Ranta had seemingly been saved by the swarthy man with his hair in dreadlocks who had sanpaku eyes. The paladin Kemuri.

Kemuri-san! Haruhiro wanted to call out to him. Just once, Kemuri had treated him to a drink in Sherry's Tavern, ostensibly to celebrate the party's victory over Death Spots. He wasn't a talkative man, but he was ridiculously well-built, and while his bad eyes made him look scary, he was definitely a good guy.

If he recalled correctly, the elf was Lilia.

The long-armed man who wore a mask was, from what Haruhiro had heard, not human.

Standing a little distance away from the rest, with the face and physique of a child, was the muddy-eyed necromancer Pingo. Haruhiro didn't really know what a necromancer was, but they apparently created golems, or something like that. But, what did that mean, creating them? Haruhiro had no clue.

Regardless, Haruhiro's comrades were safe. From the looks of things, Ranta, Kuzaku, Merry, and Shihoru weren't hurt as badly as Haruhiro or Yume.

Thank goodness.

"Shima, treat them," Soma called.

The gorgeous and sexy older girl walked over. "Oh, me. Oh, my. This is pretty bad. It's a good thing you're still alive."

"...Uh, right, sorry..." Haruhiro mumbled.

"What are you apologizing for? You silly thing."

When Shima giggled, Haruhiro's mind went blank and he couldn't think of anything. In the time that he'd been taken out of commission by the abnormal degree of adult sexiness she exuded, she finished healing him. It wasn't like a priest's magic. He didn't really know what kind of magic it was.

Yume got Shima to heal her, too. Apparently Merry had already used her light magic on Ranta and Kuzaku. Merry and Shihoru were lightly injured. Merry quickly healed Shihoru and was in turn quickly healed by Shima.

"Thanks!" Ranta bowed down and performed a kowtow in front of Soma's group. "Seriously! Seriously! You saved our hides! We got our hides saved! We nearly died there! We nearly got wiped out there! Thanks! Hey! Haruhiro! Yume! Shihoru! Merry! And you, too, Kuzaku! All of you! Bow your heads! Hurry up! Are you all stupid?! You have no common sense at all, huh? You pack of morons! You wanna die?! Huhh?!"

“Don’t sweat it,” Soma said simply, and Ranta jumped back up on his feet at the speed of light.

“I know, right?! Getting kowtowed to for something so minor, it’s just off-putting, right?! Come on, Haruhiro! It’s just like I said, right?! Don’t make me kowtow like that, you dolt!”

“...You did that all on your own.”

“Like I would ever do that! Me! You think I’d kowtow for anyone if you weren’t forcing me to?! Honestly, this guy’s a real piece of work! I apologize, seriously! He’s got those sleepy eyes and he’s a malicious villain! He tries to knock me down every chance he gets!”

“You’re a natural piece of trash, you know that, man,” said Haruhiro. “You never change...”

“What a funny boy,” Shima said with a giggle.

“Swoooon,” Ranta put a hand to his heart and fell to the ground. “...Dammit. That one totally got me... I’m in love...”

“...How embarrassing,” Shihoru said, shrinking into herself.

“If only he’d just disappear.” Yume arched her eyebrows, looking sad if anything.

“Um,” Merry bowed her head. “—Thank you. This all happened because I wasn’t doing my job as healer properly...”

Kuzaku sat on the ground, hugging one knee, an awkward expression on his face.

“No.” Kemuri twisted his thick lips into a slight frown. “There was nothing you could have done there, I’m sure. It wasn’t an issue with your healer.”

“...Uhuhuhuh,” the necromancer Pingo uttered a creepy laugh. “The moment they attacked you, it stopped being worth talking

about... Uheheh..."

Beside Pingo, the golem emitted a low groan of agreement.

"I agree." Lilia's voice was incredibly cold. "If you're trying to press onward with a level of skill that lets the three demi-humans look down on you, I'm sure you must not want to live very much."

The much-too-beautiful elf's look of contempt, paired with her cutting tone of voice, really hit home.

At this point, honestly, all I can say is that I'm sorry, Haruhiro thought. *Or rather, if I could, I wish I could just fade away without saying anything.*

"They're right," Soma nodded. "You have to value your lives."

"...Right," Haruhiro said. "Sorry. We won't do it again..."

"That's not good, either."

"...Huh?"

"If all you do with them is hold them dear, your lives have no value," said Soma. "Life is something that's meant to be used."

"Life is meant to be used," Haruhiro repeated slowly.

"You yourselves decide how yours are to be used," Soma continued. "That's what it means to live."

"Here he goes again," Shima said with a bewitching smile. "Try not to take the things Soma says too seriously. He's sure to forget them by tomorrow, then start saying something else entirely different."

"Really?" Soma asked Shima with a serious look on his face.

"Yes," Shima said flat out. "That's the kind of man you've always been."

Soma lowered his eyes, sighing slightly. “I see...”

Soma is looking kind of depressed? Haruhiro traded glances with Ranta and the rest. *Somehow, this Soma... he’s kind of different from what we expected... don’t you think?*

He glanced to the bogie corpses. Most of the bogies had died from a single stroke. With just one stroke, they had been slashed to death. Soma had made a clean sweep of around ten bogies in an instant, all by himself. He was the most powerful volunteer soldier, someone who could do the impossible like that with ease. He was strong, just incredibly strong, and probably wise, too, and cool, a person so far out of Haruhiro and the others’ reach that he might as well have been above the clouds, and there was no way to get closer to him. That was the image they’d had... but not anymore.

“If you’re so inexperienced that the three demi-humans would pick a fight with you,” Lilia said, pointing deeper into the Wonder Hole, “you can just race past this section. If you go four hundred meters, and enter the nest of the muryans, the three demi-humans won’t chase you any further. If you’re foolish enough to explore the Wonder Hole without knowing even that much, I advise you to turn back now and live out the rest of your days in quiet self-reflection.”

Every word the elf spoke hurt. However, she wasn’t just criticizing Haruhiro and the party, she was also giving them advice.

I don’t know whether to think she’s scary, or kind, Haruhiro thought.

“Hey, wait, you guys.” Kemuri took a quick look at Haruhiro and company’s faces. “You’re them, right? The ones who took down Death Spots.”

“Yeah, yeah! That’s right!” Ranta looked ready to do a happy dance. “You remembered, huh! It’s an honor! Seriously, seriously! I’m the man who took down Death Spots!”

“All of you did, you mean,” Kemuri corrected.

At the correction, Ranta got down and prostrated himself. “—Y-Yes! That’s very true! It wasn’t me, it was all of us! Sorry!”

“One of you’s missing,” said Kemuri. “Monroe, was it? What happened to him?”

“His name was Moguzo,” Haruhiro said in a strong tone, then looked downwards. “...He died. We let him die, you could say. At Deadhead Watching Keep...”

“In Blue Snake Force, huh,” Kemuri said, slapping his forehead. “Well, for a tank, it’s better to die than to let your comrades die.”

“Is it?” Shima asked.

Kemuri shrugged his shoulders a little. “I’d think so.”

“Hmm,” Shima said. “That’s pretty cool.”

“...They’re a bunch of idiots,” Pingo muttered. “Tanks are nothing but idiots... Uheheh...”

Soma furrowed his brow. “Are tanks idiots? I’m a tank. That would make me one, too.”

“I can’t disagree,” Lilia said, coldly as ever.

“It happens often,” Shima said with a sad smile. “And you can’t cry each and every time it does. But, deep in your heart as you may try to bury them, those lukewarm tears will seep out. Always and forever.”

Haruhiro wasn’t confident that he understood Shima’s poetic words. However, he would surely never forget them. Not Manato, or Moguzo. Merry probably couldn’t forget her comrades, either, and it must have been the same for Kuzaku.

Why, when it meant having feelings like these, did they continue being volunteer soldiers? To make a living? That was part of it. Stubborn pride? That was probably part of it, too. An addiction to the

thrill of risking their lives? He couldn't entirely deny it, but that was definitely not all there was to it.

It was to never forget.

Manato, and Moguzo, they had lived as volunteer soldiers, had used their lives for that, used them up, and died.

He didn't want to reject the lives his comrades, his friends, had lived. He didn't want to think they were worthless. He wanted to carve them into his memory.

Truthfully, he wanted to see what lay at the end of this path, the one Manato and Moguzo should have trodden.

"...I'm not sure we need to bury them," Haruhiro said.

Shima nodded slightly, gesturing for him to continue.

Haruhiro wasn't entirely sure what he wanted to say, what he was trying to say. Still, he couldn't remain silent.

"This may seem like clinging to the past, but rather than bury them, wouldn't it be fine for us to hold them tight?" he asked.

"You know what..." Soma suddenly crouched down in front of Haruhiro. They were staring into one another's eyes, and it made him feel a little restless.

"Will you come join my place?" Soma asked.

"...Come again?"

Join? His place? What does he mean, his place? Haruhiro thought. *His house? Go to Soma's house? That's not it, huh. That's probably not it.*

"Erm... By your place, you mean..."

"The Day Breakers."

“Ohh,” Haruhiro said. “I get it now. Of course that’s it. Hahaha... Wait, whaaaaaaaaaaaa?!”

Ranta and the others probably shouted out loud or jumped up in reaction to that bombshell, too. But Haruhiro was so floored that he didn’t hear or see any of his comrades’ reactions.

“Wha—Huh...?! Wh... B-but... It’s so sudden... No—I don’t know what to say, huh...? A-Are you pulling my leg...?”

“Pulling your leg?” Soma didn’t bat an eye—he looked down at Haruhiro’s leg. “That’s an awfully sudden thing to ask.”

No, you’re the one who’s sudden! Haruhiro thought.

While Haruhiro was in a daze and couldn’t deliver that witty retort, Lilia shook her head and sighed. “...Soma. What are you saying all of a sudden?”

“Did I word it poorly?” Soma asked. “I’m trying to invite them to join the Day Breakers.”

“I understood that much,” said Lilia. “Are you mocking me?”

“Why would I mock you, Lilia? I respect you.”

“Th-That’s...” Lilia’s cheeks, normally white as the fresh fallen snow, turned slightly pink. “...I can feel that. Or rather, that’s not what I was trying to say.”

“Can’t I?” Soma looked to Lilia, Shima, Kemuri, Pingo, and the golem in turn. Then, he hung his head and lowered his eyes. “I can’t, huh...?”

He’s depressed... right? Completely, Haruhiro thought. *No matter how I look at him.*

“I don’t know that you can’t.” Lilia bit her lip. “...It’s not so much that you can’t. That’s not it, I was just trying to say...”

“We don’t have many receivers left, you know,” Shima said looking slightly exasperated as she gave Lilia a little help. “You do understand that, right?”

Soma furrowed his brow slightly, tilting his head to the side. “What’s wrong with that?”

“What, you ask?” Shima answered.

“If we run out, we just have to find more,” said Soma. “Don’t get so hung up on them.”

“...That’s—Well, yes, you’re right,” she admitted.

“You’re an idiot.” Pingo leaned back against the golem, looking up into the sky. “You’re an idiot. An idiot beyond all saving. But I knew that. Uheheheh...”

Kemuri gave a short “Ha,” then slapped Soma on the shoulder. “What you’re saying isn’t wrong. You’re able to do it. Do what you like, Soma.”

Soma placed his hand on top of Kemuri’s. “Thanks, Kemuri.”

“...No.” Kemuri looked a little shy. “You don’t need to thank me...”

“Now, then,” Soma said, turning back once more and looking straight into Haruhiro’s eyes with his perfectly clear ones. “Our goal is to invade Undead DC in the former Kingdom of Ishmal. We’re currently in the process of searching for the route, but I don’t expect to be able to accomplish that goal right away. It will take time. We’ll need power, too. The power of even one more person helps. I don’t mind if you’re inexperienced. Everyone starts that way. You just need to build up more power. If you will fear not death, face death, and seek life when faced with death, I welcome you.”

This is a fork in the road, Haruhiro thought. *It’s a turning point in our lives.*

Still, could this be any more sudden? I want time to think it over. I want to decide once I've had sufficient time to discuss it with my comrades. But, probably, I don't have that kind of time. We met Soma here. It was a miracle that Soma saved us. I shouldn't assume I'll ever have a chance like this again.

Whether they made use of this opportunity or let it go to waste, that was up to Haruhiro and his comrades. No, not quite.

It was up to Haruhiro.

Is that okay? Won't they hold it against me later? I mean, this is more than we deserve. Won't I regret it later? This is no time to be indecisive.

Haruhiro stood up.

"Please, let us in. Let us join the Day Breakers."

Merry, or Shihoru, or Yume, or perhaps all three of them, gasped. Ranta shouted "Hi-yah!" and started pumping his arm, while Kuzaku let out a "Huh...?"

—I went and did it. I arbitrarily made the decision on my own.

"I'll be glad to have you," Soma said, rising with a slight smile, then waved to Pingo. "Give me a receiver."

Pingo pulled a black, flat stone-like object from somewhere and passed it to Soma. Soma, in turn, passed it to Haruhiro.

"That is a relic called a receiver," Soma said. "You know what relics are, yeah?"

"...No," Haruhiro admitted. "I don't know."

"Well, you see, here's what relics are." Shima began to explain. "It's an overarching name for anything that can't be made with modern technology, and was clearly made in the past. They're usually

weapons or armor, or handy items. What you have there is of the handy items variety. Hold it up to your ear."

"Oh, okay."

When Haruhiro pressed the receiver to his ear, Soma held a different stone—it was shaped the same as the receiver, but the color was different, it was pure white instead—up to his mouth.

"This is Soma." *"This is Soma."*

"Whuh? It kinda vibrated... I heard you twice—Huh?! What is this...?"

"The one Soma is holding is a sender." Shima held a different receiver up to her own ear. "The receiver is a relic that his voice can reach no matter how far apart you are. Well, there are channels, and a bunch of other stuff involved, too, though. When the receiver receives a voice from the sender, it vibrates while emitting sound and, also, light."

Shima pointed to the lower end of her receiver. When Soma pressed on the sender with his thumb, the section Shima was pointing to flashed green.

"We've made some new comrades." *"We've made some new comrades." "I'll introduce them."*

When Soma finished speaking, he pointed the sender towards Haruhiro. *Say something,* was that it?

"Uh... um... er..." Haruhiro cleared his throat. "—I am Haruhiro... the one being introduced. Nice to meet you. Is that good enough?"

"Yeah." Soma brought the sender back to his mouth. "Six people, including Haruhiro, have joined us. That is all. May we meet again."

"Take good care of it... Uheheheh..." Pingo laid a shockingly dark glare on Haruhiro. "There's only one receiver left. Also... If you think

you might die, destroy the receiver. Before you die... be absolutely certain you do. You also never know when Soma may contact you for the most trivial of things... like just now. Keep it on you at all times. Don't miss what he says, you trash."

"Y-Yes, sir!" Haruhiro stammered.

"Well, for now, just survive," Kemuri said, as if it was tiresome.

"Yes." When Shima crossed her arms, it accentuating her voluptuous bosom, which was kind of dangerous. "That would be for the best."

"I'm not expecting anything," Lilia said, cold to the end. "Do try your best not to completely waste that receiver. As things stand, you six are worth far less than a single receiver."

"If you go through the domain of the three demi-humans into the muryans' nest, there are ustrels lurking there." Soma gestured in that direction with his chin. "Once you're able to defeat an ustrel, the area you can operate in should expand considerably."

"...An ustrel," Haruhiro said.

"May we meet again."

Soma left them with just those words, then was gone like the wind. Kemuri, Shima, Lilia, Pingo, the golem, all they did was wave, without so much as a word of parting, and the next thing he knew they were out of sight.

Was it all a dream...? A daydream? No, it wasn't. That wasn't what happened. Haruhiro was holding the receiver firmly in his hand.

At a glance, it was just a flat, black stone that fit in the palm of his hand, but it had ridges and slits on it, and it didn't feel quite like stone or metal. Anyway, it was a mysterious item, whatever it was.

Haruhiro looked at his comrades. All of them, even Ranta, were

dazed.

“Ha ha…”

For the moment, Haruhiro decided to play it off with a laugh. Not that he could.

Haruhiro scratched his head. “Looks like we joined the Day Breakers.”

17. Run

Haruhiro had had a certain encounter.

Thinking it a chance he couldn't afford to miss, he had grasped it without hesitation.

The chance to change had come. It was no longer time to walk. Now was the time to run.

"Ghh! Urkh! Ahh!"

Kuzaku was desperately holding off a muryan's attack with his shield.

If you were to describe muryans with one word, they were ants. In terms of size, they were larger than humans. They were grape-colored, with bodies that were more solidly built than those of ants, and they had small heads. Depending on the type, some had one pair of arms in addition to their three pairs of legs. There were a lot of differences, yes, but they were similar to ants. Giant ants that had built nests all over the Wonder Hole, where they bred.

"Hah! Hah! Take that!" Ranta hollered.

Ranta was locking blades with another muryan. The one Kuzaku was facing was a type of muryan commonly called a samurai. They were a vicious variety that used their dexterous hands to hold weapons which they used to brutally attack hostile creatures. Meanwhile, Ranta was fighting one that primarily fought to protect against external threats to the nest, a soldier with two blade-like

arms.

In addition to that, Haruhiro and Yume were each fighting a muryan soldier, and Merry was in the back, guarding Shihoru.

“Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart...!” Shihoru cast Lightning. A bolt of lightning fell on Soldier C, the one Yume was fighting with.

It wasn’t clear why, but Falz Magic seemed to work well against muryans. Soldier C leapt away with a jolt, its body shaking before it collapsed. Yume put away her machete, readied her bow, and nocked an arrow. With a shout, she loosed the arrow, keeping a new enemy, Soldier D, in check as it came out of the nest. Haruhiro wasn’t good at handling the non-humanoid muryans. He focused on using Swat to defend himself while keeping track of the battle situation.

“Kuzaku, Ranta! Incoming!” Haruhiro called.

“Just telling us isn’t going to help!” Kuzaku yelled back.

It looked like Kuzaku was at his limit just blocking the samurai’s black katana-like weapons with his shield. That katana wasn’t metal. It looked to be something like porcelain, but it was hard and had destructive power. The samurai had a natural affinity for dual-wielding, so it was hard to blame Kuzaku for struggling against its two-weapon style.

“Zwoosh! Ha! Avoid!” Ranta fell back using Exhaust to draw in Soldier A, then took a stab at it.

Soldier A took a sword through the face, and yet wasn’t dead. All the same, with its face, including its eyes, smashed, that was no minor injury. With heavy grunts and repeated shouts, Ranta went to town on it, slashing it over and over. Soon enough, Soldier A stopped moving.

“Yume, help Kuzaku!” Haruhiro ordered while defending with Swat.

“Aye, sir!” Yume called, and went to support Kuzaku.

Ranta took a swing at the newly arrived Soldier D. Shihoru cast Lightning again. The muryan trying to follow behind Soldier D, Soldier E, was struck by lightning.

Another soldier came, and Merry moved up.

“Haru, switch!” she called.

“I’m counting on you!” he shouted back. He left Soldier B to Merry, moving forward himself.

Yume drew her machete, trying to attack the samurai from the side. Even so, the samurai faced down both Kuzaku and Yume, not willing to give an inch. It really was a formidable opponent, but, in all honesty, Haruhiro wished Kuzaku had taken it down, not just kept it busy.

I want him to show that he’s at least trying, Haruhiro thought. *The way things are, he’s not a proper tank. Is he okay with that?*

But enough moaning, he added to himself. *It can wait.*

Haruhiro stopped Soldier F’s advance with a Swat. *You’re not going any further.*

“Leap Out!” Ranta called, and jumped forward on the diagonal. However, he did more than just slip past Soldier D. As he passed by, he lopped Soldier D’s head off. “—Wahahaha! I’m amazing!”

“Ranta, next!” Haruhiro shouted.

“I know already, okay?!”

Soldier G’s coming in, noted Haruhiro.

Ranta closed in swiftly with Leap Out, bashing his longsword against Soldier G repeatedly.

He's getting carried away. It's fine for now, but—the problem's what comes next. If more of them come out...

Whenever Haruhiro started thinking that, they always did. And sure enough...

Of course they came, he thought in frustration. *Here's Soldier H.*

"Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart...!" Perhaps getting a little impatient, Shihoru let loose Lightning on the samurai. Unlike with a soldier, samurais couldn't be immobilized with one shot of Lightning. Still, the samurai fell back one step, or a few dozen centimeters.

Kuzaku bellowed a war cry, and Yume shouted, "Meow, meow, meow!" as they both whaled on the samurai.

"You moron!" Ranta shouted.

I know how he feels. It's Kuzaku, thought Haruhiro.

Yume could see that the samurai hadn't recovered from the shock, so she was focusing her attacks on the head. Compared to that, Kuzaku was just being sloppy. He was just swinging his longsword wildly, most of his strikes getting deflected by the samurai's katana.

What should I do with Soldier H? Haruhiro thought. *Have Kuzaku or Yume take it? But I probably shouldn't leave Yume alone against the samurai. Should I have Kuzaku buy time while Yume heads and deals with Soldier H? Agh, what do I do? I have to do something. I believe that we can. No, I can't just believe. I have to think, make decisions, then execute them.*

Today, again, they had raced past the domains of the three demi-humans and walked around the area known as the muryan nest. They had killed countless muryans. The muryans didn't attack indiscriminately like the three demi-humans would, but the samurai were highly aggressive. If a samurai initiated combat, soldiers would gather around, and even individual soldiers would attack if they got too close. Soldiers would try to call in other nearby soldiers.

If they brought back the samurai's black katana-like weapons, they were worth good money. Haruhiro didn't know the details, but apparently by melting them together with other metals, they could be used to create a high-quality alloy. With some individual soldiers, parts of their exoskeletons were a greenish-gold color, and those parts could be sold. There were apparently queens, which laid eggs, and stallions, which bred with the queens, further in, but they had never encountered any. The countless small workers that built the nest were both harmless and worthless, so they could be ignored outright.

Their party wasn't quite making money hand over fist, but they never came back in the red. If they were going to try to build their strength slowly but surely with experience, the muryan nest wasn't a bad place to hunt. There was no shortage of prey, and while the samurai were formidable, there weren't that many of them. If they remained cautious, they were infinitely easier to handle than the seemingly endless hordes of demi-humans.

Also, just as the demi-humans made no attempt to enter the muryan nest, the muryans seemed to be avoiding the demi-humans' territory. If things went badly, Haruhiro and his party could pull back into demi-human territory, and the muryans would generally back off. The space between demi-human territory and the muryan nest could be used as a sort of safe zone.

"I mean, come on," Ranta snarled. "Do something about it! You know what I'm talking about, right?! Well?!"

After the sun had gone down and they'd returned to the back streets of the Lonesome Field Outpost to get dinner and drinks at one of the food stalls, Ranta snapped.

"Why're you sitting there with that dumb look on your face like this has nothing to do with you?!" he bellowed. "Are you stupid?! I'm talking to you, pal! Y! O! U!"

"...Huh?" Kuzaku, who had been looking the other direction and taking little sips from his drink, slowly turned to look at Ranta.

“Y’mean me?”

“Yeah, you!” Ranta bellowed. “Who else could I possibly mean, you moron? Yeah, I thought so, nobody! Well?!”

“Y’think?” Kuzaku asked.

“I do think! It’s you! You’re the problem!”

“Not so loud,” Merry told them in a hushed voice.

“That’s right,” Yume said, rubbing her own shoulders. “Ranta’s voice, it’s annoyin’. It gets on your nerves, y’know. Havin’ to hear it, that’s a bother for everyone around us.”

“Not just everyone around us,” Shihoru said with a sigh. “It’s a bother for me, too.”

“Shihoruuuuu. Rururuuuuu,” Ranta called. “I’m gonna grope you!”

“...Jess, yeen, sark...”

“Whoa, hold up, wh-what are you drawing elemental sigils and chanting for?!”

“For self-defense,” said Shihoru. “I think it’s justified. Jess, yeen, sark, fram...”

“Whoa, wait, I get it, I get it already, okay? I’ll keep my voice down. It’s not like I’m doing it because I want to pick a fight with the guy, you know?”

Haruhiro scratched his head. “Then talk like a normal person to begin with.”

“Heh.” Ranta flicked his nose with his thumb. “Like I was saying. You need to do something about this, Kuzaku. Yes, it goes without saying, I’m talking to you.”

Kuzaku was looking off in the opposite direction again. “Something about what?”

“No, before that, I don’t like your attitude,” Ranta said angrily. “What’re you acting all sulky for?”

“I’m not really sulking, man.”

“No, you absolutely, totally are,” Ranta said. “Do you think you’ve got the right to sulk or something? Huh?”

“I know I’m not doing a great job,” Kuzaku said.

“Yeah, and what good does just knowing that do?” Ranta demanded. “Are you sulking because you can’t do your job right?”

“I may not look it…” Kuzaku hung his head, holding his chin. “…but it’s really got me down.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t have any right to feel down about it, pal,” Ranta snapped. “Are you a moron? You must be a moron.”

“Quit calling me a moron,” Kuzaku said.

“Ohh? Is that backtalk I’m hearing?” Ranta sang. “Some uppity backtalk? Are you sane? Are you a stupid moron? You must be a stupid moron, huh? I knew it. I so knew you were.”

“Listen, buddy…” Kuzaku said angrily.

“Whoa there,” said Ranta. “You just glared at me? This uppity guy went and glared, at me? Listen, pal, save that for when you’ve done what you’re supposed to, okay? You’re supposed to be a tank, damn it. You’re our tank, but you’re a crappy tank that can’t even fill the role, you scrub.”

“I already said!” Kuzaku shouted. “I know I’m not doing my job!”

“If you know that, what’re you sulking for?!” Ranta yelled back. “What?! Is this it?! I’m just a wittle toddler, and I can’t do what you

need me to, but I'm twying weeeeally hard, so be weeeeally nice to me for it, huh?!"

"I never said that," Kuzaku sulked.

"Yeah, you didn't *say* it! You implied it with your attitude!"

"You ass!" Kuzaku tried to grab Ranta.

Well, "tried" being the operative word there, because Ranta struck the underside of Kuzaku's chin with his palm as he did. Kuzaku reeled backwards and fell over. Just before he fell, he managed to get his hands on the ground, so he ended up on all fours.

"...Dammit... You ass..."

"Is that the only insult you've got, you pissant?" Ranta sneered.

"Hey, Ranta..." Haruhiro began.

"You stay quiet, Haruhiro! I'm gonna tell this fool what he needs to hear, because you're too damn weak to do it!" Ranta crouched down next to Kuzaku, jabbing his index finger against Kuzaku's forehead. "Listen up, you crappy tank! We don't give a damn if you're trying hard or not! Results are what matters! Fruitless effort is always worth crap! A stinking pile of crap! How many days do you think we've been fighting the muryans for now, you dolt?! Six days! Six! That's six whole days! It makes no difference to us whether a tank who starts whining when he has to handle one muryan comes or not! Actually, if anything, we're better off without a guy like that! If you're supposed to be our tank, man up and at least take two of them! Do it like you're ready to die! If you can't, then just die! You got all that, you crappy tank?!"

Kuzaku looked downwards, making no attempt to push away Ranta's finger.

If he had wanted to, Haruhiro could have been able to stop Ranta. He could have interrupted, not letting him finish.

Not just Haruhiro. Yume and Shihoru, who were always critical of Ranta, or even Merry, could have said something.

They didn't.

Telling him that they were better off without him, that he should go die, that he was a crappy tank... Haruhiro wouldn't have gone that far. *Still, I am dissatisfied with Kuzaku. Even setting aside the issue of ability, despite being blessed with above average height, Kuzaku is surprisingly small as a tank.*

It's not that he's goofing off, or that he's holding back. I think Kuzaku's been trying his best. But that's all he's doing.

I mean, fair enough, I told him to focus on using Block, but if he has been doing that seriously, shouldn't he be able to do a little more? Kuzaku only plays the role he's been given, just defending himself against the attacks of the enemies I assign him. It might be that that's all he could manage, but he barely looks around at all. Not at the enemy, or at his comrades. He's just there. Like a somewhat well-made obstacle. Honestly, it doesn't really feel like he's fighting with *us.*

Even so, Kuzaku had joined the party after Haruhiro and the others. He was at a different level of experience. There had to be difficulties that only he was experiencing.

That's why I thought I had to overlook it. I figured if I was patient with him, eventually he'd improve, Haruhiro thought. *I haven't known Kuzaku that long, so I held back. It must have been the same for Yume and the others.*

Regardless of all that, Haruhiro hadn't said what he should have. He'd let Ranta do it.

That night, Kuzaku said, "I'm going to go cool my head" or something like that, and left the cramped tent right away. Not long after that, Ranta was snoring away.

Haruhiro couldn't sleep, so he stepped outside.

While walking through the tent encampment along the outside of the moat, he noticed figures in the middle of a grove of trees. Haruhiro hid behind one of the tents. There might have been no need for him to, but it was force of habit.

The red moon hung in the sky.

Kuzaku was seated, leaning with his back against a tree. Merry stood beside him.

It's an awkward distance between them, thought Haruhiro. She was beside him, yes, but there was enough space for a person to fit between them. When he saw that, Haruhiro found himself relieved.

Maybe I'm jealous, he thought. *But, really, do I have any reason to be jealous? Merry is one of my comrades, no more, no less. She's beautiful, and if I had to say whether I like her or dislike her, I like her, and, well, this'd never happen, but if Merry asked me to go out with her, I'm sure I'd happily say yes. No, maybe not. I'm not so sure romance between party members is a great idea, so I might struggle with the question. But, really, I don't think I could refuse. Not that it's even possible that would ever happen. Yeah, it really is impossible, isn't it?*

Thinking about that started to feel so empty and pointless.

The two of them hadn't noticed Haruhiro. *I should get out of here now, not eavesdrop on them like a creep,* he thought. Besides, their voices were too quiet for him to make out what they were saying.

What happened between Kuzaku and Merry? he wondered. *What's their relationship? Have they been secretly meeting like this all along? Right now, it just looks like they're talking with a kind of awkward distance between them. But something could start between them. What do I mean by "something"? Well, that, I guess. Yeah. That'd be it.*

Not that it'd be a bad thing, you know, he told himself. He hadn't meant to make Kuzaku feel like an outsider, but Kuzaku might have been feeling that way. If he became closer with Merry, it might alleviate that somewhat.

Still, though, what're they talking about? he thought. *I wonder. Not that wondering does me any good, huh.*

Haruhiro let out a short sigh, then turned around and went back.

Am I going to be able to sleep tonight...?

18. A Methodology for Arriving at Their Goal

Haruhiro didn't know what had happened, and didn't want to know, but Kuzaku had changed.

"Ha!" Kuzaku shouted.

While using Block to defend against a samurai's black katana, he swung out with his right arm and took a slash at Soldier A. There was no sign of the timid paladin from before, who had shrunk into himself like a turtle, entirely occupied with defense.

"Ha! Urkh!"

Because he was opening his body up more, he gave the enemy a lot of opportunities to attack. Unable to fully Block the samurai's black katana, sometimes he'd take a hard whack to his helmet. Other times, he'd be hit by a riposte from Soldier A, and it would look like he was going to fall back. Despite that, Kuzaku held in there, keeping the samurai in front of him as he continuously attacked Soldier A.

Neither the samurai nor Soldier A could ignore Kuzaku. It was hard to say it was impressive work—he was putting himself at a lot of risk—but Kuzaku was taking on two of them at the same time.

"Wahahaha! See, you *can* do it if you put your mind to it!" Ranta hollered.

Ranta, well, he was the same as ever.

Ranta attacked hard, using Leap Out and Exhaust to toy with his opponents. After taking down Soldier B with Avoid, he immediately moved on to Soldier C. “Keep it up! It makes it easier for me to put on a show!”

“Jess, yeen, sark, kart, fram, dart!” Shihoru let loose with the higher level version of Lightning, Thunderstorm, making short work of three new soldiers as they came out of the nest. Two more soldiers leapt out from behind them, but if Shihoru hadn’t taken out the first three, there would have been five reinforcements.

“Nice one, Shihoru!” Haruhiro called.

Haruhiro used Swat on Soldier D’s blade-like right arm with his sap, using his dagger to Swat its left arm, too. When he was up against muryans, there was no hope of using Arrest or Shatter, but while he’d been having trouble sleeping last night, he had spent some time thinking about it.

How about this? Haruhiro got in as close to the muryan as he could. It tried to bite him, but he had expected that. Without haste or loss of composure, he slammed his sap into the onrushing muryan’s face and then stabbed his dagger under its jaw. From there, he twisted its head right off.

The samurai were pretty well built, with thick arm and leg joints and necks, but the soldiers weren’t so much. Actually, they were pretty flimsy.

“Mrrrow!” Yume lopped off one of Soldier E’s arms with her machete, quickly turning her blade around to pierce the top of its head. While it was unsteady on its feet, she unleashed a relentless combo attack on it. Utterly relentless. She didn’t so much cut Soldier E’s head off as pulp it.

Haruhiro signaled Yume with his eyes, then went for Soldier F. Yume went for Soldier G. Merry was checking her left wrist. Protection hadn’t worn off yet.

“Ah! Ngh! Hah!” Kuzaku yelled.

Kuzaku was tenacious, still keeping both the samurai and Soldier A busy. Ranta was overwhelming Soldier C, and it looked like he’d take it down soon. Haruhiro used Swat on Soldier F’s arm.

I’ll put this guy down quick, too, he thought.

“Huh?!”

Kuzaku let out a strange cry, so, for an moment, Haruhiro wondered if their tank had made some blunder, but he was wrong.

It’s the samurai, Haruhiro realized. *The samurai’s fleeing.*

“Wai—What’s that going on?!” While continuing to Block against Soldier A’s arm, Kuzaku looked to Haruhiro.

Hey, man, I have no idea what’s going on either, Haruhiro thought. The samurai were unusually belligerent muryans, and once they identified an enemy, they would fight tenaciously to the death. Yet, now, one was running away. They had never seen that happen before. Haruhiro didn’t have any more idea what was up than Kuzaku.

What happened next didn’t make any more sense to him.

Had the samurai given some kind of signal? It didn’t seem like it, but the soldiers all began pulling back.

“The hell?! I’m not letting you get away!” Ranta shouted, chasing after Soldier C to get one last strike in.

Yeah, something’s weird here, Haruhiro thought.

“Hold up, Ranta!” he shouted. “Don’t go!”

“Huh?!” Ranta yelled.

“This is wrong. Something’s up.”

“What do you mean ‘something’?!”

“If I knew, I’d tell you,” said Haruhiro. “I don’t know, but it’s definitely dangerous.”

This isn’t a hunch, he thought. *Muryan ecology is close to that of the ants they resemble, and the entire hive acts like one living creature. You could say muryans don’t seem to have a sense of individuality—their role always comes before any other consideration. They’ll gladly sacrifice themselves if that’s their role. More than that, muryans may not even be equipped with an ability to put themselves first, or a sense of self-preservation to begin with.*

And yet, one of those muryans ran away.

That samurai probably wasn’t thinking anything when it did it. Muryans aren’t sentient like that. Most likely this was a case where they always run without hesitation, getting out of the situation. It’s something programmed into the muryans.

Why would it run? Because it ran away. To retreat. But from what?

Haruhiro glanced to all of the tunnels around them. That included the hole that the samurai and soldiers had fled into.

In this area called the muryan nest, unlike the domain of the three demi-humans, the tunnel was only around ten meters across, and only half that tall. It was full of twists and turns, so they couldn’t see far ahead. The hole was just wide enough that two muryans could pass each other. Humans could go in.

“Let’s hide,” Haruhiro said quickly.

Everyone could sense something was out of the ordinary. Not even Ranta argued. Haruhiro and the others took shelter in the muryans’ hole.

“What do you think it is?” Shihoru asked in a whisper.

Haruhiro shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Hrmm...” Yume let out a low groan next to Haruhiro.

“Shut up, all of you!” Ranta shouted.

“You’re the only one being noisy,” Kuzaku complained.

“Ohh? Kuuuuzakuuuu,” said Ranta. “You’re getting pretty cheeky with me, aren’tcha? Even though you’re a talentless tank.”

“Isn’t that kinda irrelevant? In this situation.”

“It is,” Merry agreed.

Haruhiro and the others stood in a line with their backs pressed up against the wall of the muryan hole. In order of closeness to the entrance, the line went Haruhiro, Yume, Shihoru, Ranta, Merry, Kuzaku.

Merry’s next to Kuzaku, Haruhiro thought. *Yeah, but so what? Isn’t that, if anything, irrelevant? Yeah. It’s totally irrelevant.* Haruhiro took a deep breath.

“Everyone, stay put,” he said. “I’ll go check it out.”

“You gonna be okay?” Yume asked. “If you’re gonna be out there by yourself, isn’t that dangerous, Haru-kun?”

“I’m better off alone,” said Haruhiro. “I’m a thief, remember. This is kinda my thing.”

It was dark in the muryans’ hole. Haruhiro was careful not to make noise with his footsteps as he cautiously headed back towards the entrance. He kept his posture low, poking his face out to look around.

Unlike the domain of the three demi-humans, which was more like a canyon than a cave because it was open to the sky, the muryan nest had a roof. However, it wasn’t completely covered. There were a lot of

gaps in it, allowing light to shine through, so it was fairly bright.

Looks like there's nothing here. So far, he thought. *It's quiet. Too quiet.*

It was so incredibly quiet that even when it entered his vision, he didn't immediately notice. At first, he just felt something was a little off.

Like, *Huh? Is there... something there?*

Like, *Huh? What's that?*

Like, *There is something there... isn't there?*

No, don't question it, Haruhiro told himself. *There is. There definitely is. That thing—it's black. No, not black—blackish. And it's wearing something like a raincoat.*

Like a person?

Probably. He has a head, arms, and legs. He's walking. Walking this way from deeper inside. I'm sure about that, but I don't hear footsteps. He's silent.

He's carrying something long. Is that a spear, maybe? But, judging from the tip, I wouldn't call it a spear. Instead of a spear, the tip is more like a sword, or a thick knife, something like a cleaver. It's like a naginata. But, more than that...

He's huge. That guy. He's got to be over two meters tall. I doubt he's three meters, but he might be two and a half.

His head's weirdly small, and he's got broad shoulders. That body shape couldn't be more of an inverted triangle if it tried. He's leaning forward, using his naginata like a crutch to walk. It looks like his naginata is touching the ground, but there's no sound.

That thing's dangerous. He's dangerous, and the way he doesn't

feel dangerous only makes him more so. It feels like he could sneak up behind you, and then take you out. That's pretty dangerous.

—Ustrel.

That name suddenly popped into his mind. Soma had mentioned them.

"If you go through the domain of the three demi-humans into the muryans' nest, there are ustrels lurking there," he had said. He'd also said, "Once you're able to defeat an ustrel, the area you can operate in should expand considerably."

Ustrels. It was probably deliberate that Soma hadn't told him any more about them. Haruhiro and the others were volunteer soldiers. Maybe not good ones, but they were volunteer soldiers nonetheless.

When they had first been brought to the Volunteer Soldier Corps office, Bri-chan had told them, "Use your own individual skills and judgment to gather intel and strike the enemy. That's the volunteer soldier way."

Soma had acknowledged Haruhiro and his group as volunteer soldiers and let them become his comrades. That was why Haruhiro and the rest would need to learn for themselves.

An ustrel, he thought. *This guy. This guy is an ustrel. We've got to take this guy out.*

In silence, utter silence, the ustrel was steadily drawing nearer.

Should I turn back and get my comrades right now? Haruhiro wondered. *But if I move now, I feel like he'll notice me. There's still some distance between us, so I should be fine, but I'm scared.*

At some point, without realizing he was doing it, Haruhiro had covered his nose and mouth to keep the sound of his breath from escaping.

I'm being way too wary, he told himself. *Calm down. I need to maintain my composure. But I really can't move.*

While I'm wasting time like this, the ustrel's closing in. He's faster than I thought, or rather, faster than he looked. Fifteen meters? Ten? That's how close he's gotten.

He hasn't noticed me... right? Haruhiro dropped to one knee, lowering himself further, then stuck his face out just a little. *There's light shining down from above, but not much. He can't see me... or shouldn't be able to. The ustrel is walking at a set pace. He hasn't started walking faster or anything, so he hasn't noticed me... I think.*

I want to pull my face back in. I can't move. This is no good. I've failed. I should have gone back right away. I was better off hiding in that hole. This is bad. He's close. Damn, he's close. He's getting really close. Five meters? Four? Three? Ohhh.

He stopped.

The ustrel made an about right turn, silent as ever. He was going away.

No, but I can't be sure yet, Haruhiro thought. *It's too soon to be relieved. A little longer. Once he's a bit further away. Is now good? I can't say for sure.*

Ultimately, once the ustrel's figure dissolved into the darkness and he could no longer see it, Haruhiro joined back up with his comrades.

"There was an ustrel," he said.

"Did it look dangerous?" Ranta asked.

Normally, Ranta probably would have charged out before asking that question. Maybe he was maturing a little.

Haruhiro nodded. "Yes, very. He was big, blackish, and carried a naginata."

"Soma was saying once we can take that guy out, the area we can operate in should expand, yeah?" Ranta said.

“Yeah.”

“In that case, there’s not just one ustrel, there are multiple ones,” Ranta said. “They’re wandering around the muryan nest and deeper in, and we can never know where we’ll encounter one.”

“On top of that…” Shihoru took a deep breath, then exhaled. “…it’s not just us humans. Other creatures are afraid of the ustrels, too.”

“What now?” Yume’s voice sounded stiffer than usual.

Ranta suddenly started chanting. “O Darkness, O Lord of Vice, Demon Call.”

In front of Ranta, something like a blackish purple cloud appeared. The clouds whirled into a vortex, taking shape. It was like a headless torso, with two holes for eyes on its chest and a slit-like mouth beneath. It was a dread knight’s familiar, a demon. It was Zodiac-kun.

“Kehe… Kehehehehe… I came because you called… Kehe… Can I go now?” Zodiac-kun asked.

“Of course you can’t! Whoops—” Ranta covered his own mouth. “Zodiac-kun. No screwing around today. We’re in for a big battle where we’ll have to sink or swim.”

“…Ehehehe… I see… At last… your time’s come to die, Ranta… Ehehe…”

“D-Don’t jinx me like that! Geez!” Ranta snapped. “I-It’s creepy, okay?”

“We’re doing this?” Kuzaku was clearly hesitant.

“I’m fine either way.” Merry sounded tense. When she checked her left wrist, the light of the hexagram had dimmed. It flickered and was about to go out. Merry made the sign of the hexagram.

"O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you... Protection."

In an instant, the light returned to the party's hexagrams.

Merry took a short breath. "It doesn't change what I have to do."

"It may be gone already," Haruhiro said, closing his eyes.

Are we prepared for this? he thought. *I don't know. I mean, I don't know anything about the enemy at all. But it's strange. For some reason, I just can't see turning tail and running as an option.*

"We'll wait and see for now," Haruhiro said. "If that guy comes back, we attack. But we'll pull him into the safe zone. We're just feeling him out. If things go south, we'll run. We may end up running pretty fast, but I'm the one who'll make the decision on that. You absolutely have to follow it. Understood?"

Ranta clicked his tongue. "There you go, acting all self-important. Oh, fine. I get it."

"Kehehehe..." Zodiac-kun cackled. "Acting so meek, Ranta... You're gonna die... Kehehehehehe... That's a death flag..."

"G-Got it," Yume said, nodding so vigorously that it was noticeable even in the darkness.

"I'll focus on attacking it with magic..." Shihoru said. "Merry, protect me."

"Sure," Merry nodded. "Leave it to me."

"We're doing this, then." Kuzaku lowered his helmet's visor. "Wonder if I can defend against it."

"Just do it," Haruhiro said. "You're a tank, aren't you?"

Haruhiro regretted the words as soon as he said them. He thought he might have worded that poorly. But Kuzaku laughed.

"Yeah. Sure am. Not much of one, but I'm a tank, so I'll do it."

"He's incredibly hard to notice, so be careful," Haruhiro warned them.

Haruhiro took the lead, and they returned to the entrance hole. He poked his face out. He was in for a shock.

—That's close!

He almost shouted out loud despite himself, but he managed to keep it in. It was there. The ustrel.

Haruhiro was confused now, so he couldn't trust his ability to eyeball the distance, but the ustrel looked like it was maybe closer than ten meters, but further than five meters away.

Not walking. Just standing there.

Suddenly, Ranta poked his head out next to Haruhiro's. "—Whoa!"

"You idiot," Haruhiro muttered.

"I'm going up front!" Kuzaku jumped out.

The ustrel was already in motion.

He was amazing—amazing—just totally amazing. He wasn't just fast, he was crazy fast. Kuzaku used Block, but it was useless. With a cry of surprise, Kuzaku and his shield were knocked flying.

Ranta got out "O Darkness...!" before he realized he didn't have time to finish his chant, and used his longsword instead. Not to attack, but to defend.

The ustrel's naginata. Here it came. Ranta somehow managed to stop it with his longsword. But, of course, he was sent flying. "—Gwah!"

Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa! This is bad! What do we do? Haruhiro

thought frantically. *This is crazy! Even if I say to run, Kuzaku and Ranta can't, and the ustrel's already heading this way. Swat? It's not gonna work. The naginata. Here comes a thrust.*

Haruhiro let out a strange shriek as he leapt aside and rolled. He didn't really follow what happened, but he apparently dodged. The ustrel slid the naginata in the palm of his hand, quickly readjusting his grip on it before swinging it down.

Towards Haruhiro, of course. He was dead. So dead.

He wanted to shout out in defiance, but he couldn't make a sound. Haruhiro crawled, trying to get away from it. The naginata scraped the ground.

Daaaamn, he moaned silently. *I-I-I-I'm gonna die. I'm seriously gonna die. What is this? What?*

With a cry, Yume loosed an arrow from inside the hole. She hit. It stabbed into the right-hand side of the ustrel's chest. The ustrel turned wordlessly, soundlessly towards Yume. Merry and Shihoru were behind her, too.

No, this is no good, thought Haruhiro. He'd been saved himself, but this was bad.

"Zwooosh!" Ranta let out a strange cry and leapt to his feet before charging the ustrel. He wasn't just acting recklessly out of desperation. It was probably to draw the ustrel's attention. But the ustrel didn't even turn around, thrusting the pommel of his naginata into Ranta's chest.

Ranta gasped and nearly collapsed, but Zodiac-kun supported him.

"Y-You idiot... Ehehe..." Zodiac-kun cackled.

"Dammiiiiit!" Kuzaku clanged on his shield with the flat of his sword a number of times. The ustrel ignored him completely.

Kuzaku put his shield up in front of him and charged into the ustrel. The ustrel didn't seemed to care. He made it look like he was going to attack Yume and the other girls, then suddenly turned around. His naginata flashed. Kuzaku couldn't fully block it.

Actually, the naginata extended further than expected, striking Kuzaku not in the shield, but the left arm. The naginata bit into his arm.

Was it cut off? Or broken? Either way, Kuzaku dropped his shield and fell to the ground, rolling around in pain.

"Gwahhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Eeeek!" Yume shrieked, backing away without nocking an arrow. Merry and Shihoru did the same. If they kept going, the hole was behind them. They'd end up going into the muryans' hole. The hole? Haruhiro and the others barely even had to duck to go into it, but what about the ustrel? The ustrel was around two and a half meters tall. It wasn't impossible that he could. However, it was smaller than the tunnels the three demi-humans used. If it came to it, it might serve as a place to take refuge.

The muryans' hole seems kind of iffy as an option, Haruhiro thought. *Well, what then? What should I do? First—First, I have to let Yume and the others get away. That. That's my highest priority.*

What could he do towards that end? What could Haruhiro do? Was this his only option?

He put away his sap. He didn't shout like Ranta and Kuzaku. He raced straight towards the ustrel. His legs were unsteady. It felt strange. His field of vision was narrowing.

The ustrel didn't turn to face him. Yume and the other girls were already in the muryans' hole.

When Haruhiro tried to leap on him, as expected, the ustrel went for him with the pommel of his naginata.

He'd seen this move before. He could dodge it, albeit barely. The ustrel's movements were sharper than anticipated, and Haruhiro was moving sluggishly. Even so, Haruhiro managed to cling to the ustrel's back.

"Yume!" he shouted. "Get away! While you still can!"

"Meowhuh?!" Yume shrieked.

While Yume stood there rigid and unmoving, Merry urged her, "Hurry!"

"Mmm!" Yume cried.

"Ah!" Shihoru added.

Shihoru led the way, dashing out from the muryans' hole. The ustrel went to swing his naginata.

I won't let you, thought Haruhiro. With a backhand stab of his dagger, he hit the ustrel in the side of the head. It bounced off.

It's hard, this feeling. A helmet? The hood of that raincoat-like garment came back, revealing the ustrel's head. *Is that... a helmet? I dunno. It's like a metal skull.*

"Uwahh! Ahh! Ahhhh!" Haruhiro repeatedly slammed his dagger into the ustrel's metallic skull. It wasn't clear if it was hurting the ustrel, but he didn't seem to like it. The ustrel twisted around, trying to throw Haruhiro off of his back, and elbowed him. The ustrel was unbelievably strong. The pain, or rather the impact of the blows, was incredible.

Shihoru, Merry, and Yume passed in front of the ustrel.

"Suuuuuuuu..."

What was that sound? The ustrel? His voice? His breathing? It wasn't clear, but the ustrel reached out with his left hand. It looked

like the ustrel planned to grab Haruhiro by the head. At worst, he might be able to crush it.

Well, Yume and the girls are already gone, so it might be time to call it quits. Haruhiro jumped off of the ustrel's back. The ustrel instantly made a turn to the right, and—

It's coming. The naginata.

"Eep!" Haruhiro threw himself to the ground. It was all he could do.

"Anger!" If Ranta hadn't taken a reckless stab at the ustrel, Haruhiro would surely have been cut in two by the next attack. But the ustrel used his left arm to knock Ranta's longsword aside.

"Wha—" While Ranta was off-balance, the ustrel took a swing at him using only his right arm.

Ahh. This is no good, Haruhiro thought. *He's dead. Ranta's gonna get killed.*

"Gehe!" It was Zodiac-kun. Without a moment to spare, Zodiac-kun shoved Ranta out of harm's way.

Zodiac-kun took the blow for Ranta, being cleaved in two by the ustrel's naginata.

"...Uh... Uhe... Ranta... Die..." Zodiac-kun muttered as he disappeared.

"After you went and saved me!" Ranta took a swing at the ustrel. "Don't say that! You, I can summon you again anytime, got it? Rahhhhh!"

"Don't get reckless, Ranta!" Haruhiro rose to his feet. "We're pulling him back to the safe zone!"

"Exhaust!" When Ranta leapt back at an incredible speed, the

ustrel... did not follow.

Instead of Haruhiro or even Yume and the other girls, the ustrel turned towards Kuzaku, who still wasn't back on his feet.

"Wai...!" Haruhiro rushed forward, but it didn't look like he'd make it, and even if he did, he wasn't sure he could save him.

"Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart!"

Lightning. Shihoru's magic. A bolt of electricity fell on the ustrel. His body convulsed and a trail of steam, or smoke, or something rose from it, but had the spell been effective? At the very least, it didn't seem to have caused any major damage.

The ustrel smoothly turned to face Shihoru and the other girls.

Not good, thought Haruhiro. He was going to target them now. But, thanks to that, Kuzaku had survived.

"Ranta! Draw him to you somehow!" Haruhiro called.

"Sure thing!" Ranta shouted.

"Get up, Kuzaku!" Haruhiro rushed to the paladin's side. Kuzaku's left arm was totally out of commission. It was a painful sight to behold. It was cut, broken, and more or less pulped.

Kuzaku, for his part, did his best to tough it out. He got to his feet on his own strength, nodding to Haruhiro. "...I'm fine. I can do this. Sorry. Would you pick up my shield for me? If you can."

"Your shield?" Haruhiro asked.

"Once I get my arm healed up, I'll need to use it again. I mean, I'm pretty useless without it."

"If things get bad, I'm ditching it, okay?" Haruhiro asked.

He picked up Kuzaku's shield. Was Kuzaku going to be able to keep

up with them? It was going to be hard for him, no doubt, but he'd have to.

Yume and the girls were running away. The ustrel gave chase. Ranta was doing what he could to divert the ustrel's attention, but it wasn't going very well. The ustrel didn't even look back, easily parrying Ranta's longsword using the pommel of his naginata and then his left arm.

"Dammiiiiit!" Ranta yelled. "What is this guy?!"

"An ustrel, duh?!" Haruhiro shouted.

Shouting meaningless nonsense as he moved his legs, Haruhiro started to think. He thought about what to think about. What should he think about?

Would Yume and the others be able to escape like that? He didn't know. But probably not. Eventually, they'd be caught. Before that happened, Haruhiro and the guys needed to stop the ustrel. Could they stop him?

"Yume! Merry! Shihoru!" he called. "When you're through the safe zone, get into the three demi-humans' tunnels!"

There was no response. The three of them were running with everything they had.

Kuzaku was falling behind. Of course he was.

The ustrel occasionally swung his naginata. Yume, who was bringing up the rear, shrieked every time he did. That naginata looked like it might reach Yume at any moment.

The ceiling opened up and it got brighter. They were already at the safe zone.

They called it a safe zone, but there wasn't anything that clearly defined the limits of it. They were almost in the three demi-humans'

domain. The main tunnel was straight, and there were side tunnels off to each side.

Suddenly, the ustrel accelerated and took a stab with his naginata.

"Ungh!" Yume leapt away diagonally, but the ustrel's naginata grazed her side and carved into it.

"Yumeeee! Leap Out!" Ranta made a crazy jump, leaping onto the ustrel's back. The ustrel turned around, slashing at him diagonally as he did.

Ranta slammed against the ground as if he were a ball or something, his helmet coming off from the impact. The ustrel immediately raised his sword. "Iggzo...!"

It looked like he was trying to shout Exhaust, but couldn't quite manage it. Ranta sprang backwards in a frog-like pose, narrowly avoiding the naginata.

Merry rushed into a side tunnel, practically carrying Yume with her. Shihoru followed.

Good, thought Haruhiro. *Nicely done, Ranta. Okay...!*

It would be hard to go down the same tunnel as Merry and the girls. Haruhiro took Kuzaku with him and headed for a different tunnel on the opposite side.

"Ranta, you come, too!" he called.

"Yeah, sure, I'm coming! It'll be easy! As if, dammit!"

Ranta repeatedly fired off his Exhaust, somehow managing to run around and avoid the ustrel's naginata. Haruhiro wanted to help, but that was a trick only Ranta could pull off. Even if he went out there, he'd probably just get in the way. The best he'd manage was to get killed while buying time so that Ranta could get away. That'd be pointless.

“You can do it, man! Actually, if you can’t do it, who could?!” Haruhiro shouted.

“You dolt!” screamed Ranta. “There you go, telling me I can do it! Everyone knows that already, so don’t say it! Leap Out!”

Ranta didn’t back away, instead he leapt past the ustrel’s side. The ustrel made an immediate right turn, swinging after him. Ranta, however, had already jumped again.

“Leap! Leap! Leapow! Lea! Lea! Lea! Leap Out!”

He leapt, and leapt, and leapt like crazy, and ran away. Haruhiro didn’t know whether to be impressed, or what.

Haruhiro and Kuzaku headed into the tunnel. All of the three demi-humans’ tunnels were a little over a meter high, and maybe seventy centimeters across. If it was low enough that even Haruhiro had to duck to get inside, the ustrel would have an even harder time.

The tunnel went for about fifty meters. There didn’t seem to be any duergar, or bogies, or spriggans. Had they detected the ustrel and taken shelter deep inside? Had Ranta managed to get away?

Kuzaku wasn’t just breathing heavily—he was also moaning, “Ow...Ow...Ow...” His left arm had to hurt. Haruhiro would have liked to join back up with the girls and get him healed, but their tunnel was on the opposite side of the main passage. He couldn’t tell if it wasn’t connected to this one.

“Kuzaku, wait here,” he said.

“...’kay.”

“I’ll be right back.”

Haruhiro left the shield behind, heading back to peek into the main passage.

The ustrel was there.

He was standing there in silence, as if he had been there for decades, right in the middle of the main passage.

What about Ranta? Haruhiro didn't see a corpse, so had he gotten into a side tunnel somehow?

He knew which tunnel Yume and the girls had gone down. He remembered it. It was pretty much straight across from him. The ustrel was standing in his way, right in the middle of the two.

For now, it looked like the ustrel wouldn't come into the three demi-humans' tunnels. However, the ustrel had no intention of letting Haruhiro and the others get away, either. He was planning to kill them when they came out of the tunnels.

Was it best to try and wait him out? If they just stayed put in the tunnels, maybe the ustrel would give up. They could also try waiting for other volunteer soldiers to pass through. They might be able to ignore the three demi-humans, but surely they couldn't ignore an ustrel.

But, today, there had already been a good number of volunteer soldiers who had passed Haruhiro and his group on their way deeper into the Wonder Hole. While there might be volunteer soldiers returning, there probably wouldn't be any more coming in. Volunteer soldiers generally returned in the evening or later. It was still noon. That was a long time away. It hurt that he had no way to communicate with Yume, Shihoru, Merry, or Ranta, too.

Even if Haruhiro came to a decision here, it wouldn't reach his comrades. And then there was Kuzaku to consider.

Haruhiro turned back to where Kuzaku was. Kuzaku's breathing was still ragged. Actually, it probably wasn't that he was out of breath. It must have been an injury of some sort.

"Kuzaku, do you think you can run one more time?" Haruhiro

asked.

"Yeah... after all... I might die... if I don't..."

"You okay?" Haruhiro asked.

"Sure." Kuzaku nodded, taking a deep breath. "I'm good. I can run."

"Okay, come with me." Heading back to just before the main passageway, Haruhiro indicated the tunnel Yume and the girls ought to be in. "It's far, but do you see the one? Merry'll be in that tunnel. Run there as fast as your legs will take you."

"...What about you?" Kuzaku panted.

"Me, I'm bait. I'll lure the ustrel to me first. You take off running once I do."

"Isn't that dangerous?" Kuzaku asked.

"It's dangerous, yeah," said Haruhiro. "It's also our only option. If you don't get treated soon, you won't be going anywhere."

"...Sure won't," Kuzaku agreed.

"I'll leave your shield here," said Haruhiro. "I'm going."

"Huh? Already?" Kuzaku asked.

"When something needs to be done, it's best to get it done quickly," Haruhiro explained.

I mean, the more I wait, the more scared I'm gonna get, anyway. Haruhiro slapped his chest. He debated whether to leave his dagger and sap or not. *If I go unarmed, maybe it'll be too obvious. But I can run faster barehanded. Don't agonize over it. Let's go.*

Haruhiro slid smoothly and silently out of the tunnel. The ustrel hadn't noticed him yet. The ustrel was facing the entrance to the

Wonder Hole. Haruhiro used Sneaking to creep along the wall in the direction of the entrance. He figured he'd enter the ustrel's line of sight soon enough.

When will he notice me? Haruhiro thought, and the question was soon answered. *Here he comes.*

The ustrel turned in his direction, and began to run without making a noise.

He's coming. He really is fast. Haruhiro dashed. He felt like his entire body was being pulled backwards. Was it terror? Pressure? He ran at top speed along the wall, and it wasn't long before the ustrel was right behind him.

What about Kuzaku? There he is. Going slow. This is no time for dawdling. I can't run the way I want to. He still hasn't made it to the tunnel he's headed for. Still not? Hang in there. Just a little further. You're almost there. He's in.

Once he saw Kuzaku had made it, Haruhiro rolled into a nearby tunnel.

"—Whoa!"

The ustrel stabbed his naginata into the tunnel after Haruhiro. Haruhiro panicked and crawled. He crawled forward. The ustrel bent over more than ninety degrees, peering into the tunnel.

He's not gonna come in... is he? Haruhiro tried stopping. The ustrel didn't move. It didn't plan to enter the tunnel. *But now, I'm trapped inside, aren't I?*

"Hey," a voice called from deeper in the tunnel. "Heeey. "Heeeeeey! Is someone there? Heeeeeeeeey!"

"...Ranta?" Haruhiro called.

Ranta appeared. "Oh, it's just Haruhiro. You alone?"

“Yeah, I am,” said Haruhiro. “How did you even get this far?”

“I came in another entrance, and after wandering around randomly, I came out here.”

“Randomly... I’m pretty sure if we run into any of the three demi-humans like this, we’re done for, though...” Haruhiro said.

Haruhiro and Ranta were both crouched lower than a half-sitting position. If they hadn’t been, their heads would have hit the ceiling. They couldn’t fight like this.

“You stupid moron,” said Ranta. “We can’t worry about every little thing right now. —And, hold on, the ustrel’s right there!”

“Yeah, it is,” Haruhiro agreed. “It won’t come in, though. We’ve got to join up with Yume and the others somehow. I managed to get just Kuzaku over to them.”

“The other side, huh...” Ranta bit his lip. “I’ve got an idea.”

Haruhiro wasn’t keen on following any plan Ranta came up with, but there weren’t any alternatives. Well, maybe there were, but he couldn’t think of them.

Haruhiro went deeper into the tunnel after Ranta. The ustrel was already out of sight. From there, he and Ranta split up. Haruhiro was left on standby. He probably waited for around five minutes.

“Heyyyyyy!” he heard Ranta shout off in the distance.

It was a simple plan. Ranta would go out the tunnel he’d come in through, then draw the ustrel to him. While he did, Haruhiro would go to the other side. Basically, Ranta had volunteered to be a decoy.

Haruhiro rushed back. The ustrel was gone. It looked like Ranta had lured it away. When Haruhiro burst out of the tunnel, he saw Ranta being chased around by the ustrel. Rather than trying to lose him, Ranta was letting the ustrel almost catch him, then using

Exhaust to put some distance between them.

Nice work, Ranta, Haruhiro thought. *But, of course, I don't have time to stand around admiring it.*

He raced full tilt towards a tunnel on the opposite side. It was a long way to the tunnel Yume and the others were supposed to be in, so he might not be able to make it there. For now, he was happy to take any tunnel he could get in.

"—Huh?! The hell's with you?!" Ranta shouted.

Had something happened? Haruhiro looked over as he ran, and saw the ustrel had come to a stop. Ranta stopped running, waving his arms and trying to provoke it.

"What's wrong?!" Ranta bellowed. "Come at me! You scared?!"

"Suuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu..."

What was that sound? A voice? Breathing? He'd heard it before, too. But this time it was much louder.

Ranta must have noticed something was strange, too. He tried to run. Before he could, the ustrel stepped forward, reaching out with his right arm.

It actually extended. His right arm—no, his left arm—no, both arms—grew to about twice their usual length. Then, using his extended right arm, he swung down its naginata.

"Urkh!" Ranta hollered.

Had that right arm been its usual length, Ranta probably could have dodged. Because it was longer now, he couldn't quite manage it. The ustrel's naginata chopped Ranta's left arm off.

"Ran—!" Haruhiro screamed. He made a snap decision, almost reflexively. "Everyone, get out here! We're saving Ranta!"

Do we stand a chance? Haruhiro wondered. *Or don't we? I dunno. But I'm confident we can do it—I think.*

The ustrel's arms. They had gotten longer. They were long now, incredibly long. Far too long.

If he didn't let that scare him, Haruhiro was sure he could get in close.

Haruhiro passed by Ranta, who was bleeding as he fell back.

The ustrel. He was insanely intimidating and coming this way. The naginata. It was a sideways swipe.

Yeah, this might kill me, thought Haruhiro. But he couldn't back down now.

In came the naginata. At the same time, Haruhiro jumped. Forward. He rolled. Was he dead? No, it didn't look like it. In fact, he was alive. It looked like he'd passed under the naginata as the ustrel swung it.

Haruhiro kept going and tackled the ustrel's legs. The ustrel's legs were incredibly short compared to his height, and thin, too. While swinging his naginata up high with his right arm, the ustrel tried to kick Haruhiro. But that was nowhere near as scary as the naginata, as Haruhiro could see it coming. He avoided the ustrel's right leg, clinging to the left one. By applying severe torque to the ustrel's knee, Haruhiro quickly scooped his leg out from under him.

The ustrel was flipped over. He struck his back on the ground, but he immediately tried to hit Haruhiro with his left arm. The ustrel had fallen, and this was clearly an opportunity, one he might never get again, but Haruhiro backed off without any hesitation or regret. If he'd hesitated for even a moment, the ustrel would have landed a powerful blow on him with his left arm.

The ustrel used his two long arms to support himself, getting up silently.

Merry and Yume are heading towards Ranta, Haruhiro noted. *Where's Kuzaku? There he is. Is he planning to go get his shield? Shihoru's with Kuzaku. It looks like both Yume and Kuzaku are fully healed.*

"Suuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu..."

There it was again. That sound. What was it this time? His arms—the ustrel's arms, they were shrinking. Getting shorter. In no time at all, they were back to their original length.

His arms don't just stretch. Can he both stretch and compress them? Haruhiro wondered. *It was so much easier to fight him in long arms mode.*

Haruhiro clicked his tongue in disappointment, sidestepping to the left. He moved in a circle. With the ustrel in the center, he quickly moved around him clockwise.

If the ustrel took a step forward, he could probably reach Haruhiro with his naginata. That was why Haruhiro moved further and further to the left before he could. The ustrel would spin in place, and the moment he had Haruhiro in front of him, he was sure to take a swing with his naginata.

This tension. If he let his guard down for even a moment, or tripped on a bump or hole, he'd be cut down. When he thought about dying, he could feel his legs started to quake.

Hurry, Haruhiro thought. *Hurry. Hurry. Hurry, hurry, hurry, hurry. Somebody.*

"Ohm, rel, ect, nemun, darsh!"

Shihoru. It was magic. Shadow Bond. A shadow elemental flew out, fixing itself to the ground at the ustrel's feet. The ustrel stepped on it. It sucked his foot in. But it seemed like he might tear free at any moment.

Shihoru didn't hesitate to cast her next spell. "Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart!"

It hit. Lightning. The ustrel was struck by a bolt of electricity.

His body convulsed—but that was all. The ustrel tore his foot free, turning towards Shihoru. Shihoru was backing away, looking like she might fall on her behind, when Kuzaku jumped out in front of her.

"I'll...!" Kuzaku shouted.

In an instant, the ustrel closed in on Kuzaku. The naginata flashed. There was a clang as Kuzaku used Block. Kuzaku braced himself against it. He didn't just manage to hold his ground. He stepped in, stabbing out with his longsword. The ustrel shifted his body to the side to avoid it, then used his naginata again.

Kuzaku used Block. He was nearly lifted into the air, but managed to force himself down. Not backing down, he moved forward and made a sharp swing with his longsword. The ustrel showed off that shifting dodge again, then the naginata. Kuzaku used Block, then his longsword. The ustrel shifted to dodge then used his naginata. Kuzaku used Block and then struck back.

"Wahaha!" Kuzaku laughed. "This is crazy! Scary! Whoa! What is this?! Damn! What the hell?! Wahaha! No way! Wahahaha! Death?! Gwehehehe!"

Is this guy right in the head? Haruhiro worried. *He really isn't sounding like it, but he's desperately struggling with terror, with the pressure, and just managing to hold out on the brink.*

Haruhiro, of course, wanted to support Kuzaku. But he couldn't get in close. Technically, he was behind the ustrel, but he couldn't get in close enough to use his dagger or sap. If he threw himself at the ustrel with reckless abandon, he might be able to manage it, but he couldn't take that risk just yet. The ustrel's back felt so distant.

Merry was trying to get started on healing Ranta. His arm had been

severed and he was bleeding profusely. It was a critical wound, so Merry would probably use Sacrament. Ranta would soon be able to return to the front line. Yume was trying to come over his way, but Haruhiro called out to her, “It’s fine! Yume, stay there!” and got her to stop. He wanted Yume to be ready if the worst should happen. If the ustrel turned his attention to Merry and Ranta while she was healing him, Yume needed to put herself on the line to stop that.

Shihoru was always behind Kuzaku, looking for opportunities to use her magic.

Haruhiro wished the ustrel would switch back to long arms mode again. But while long arms mode made things easier for Haruhiro, it might not be the same for Kuzaku. The ustrel used his left arm to block Kuzaku’s sword.

Are his arms hard? Or are they armored? Haruhiro wondered. *Yume’s arrow stabbed into the ustrel’s chest. How did it feel when I was clinging to him from behind? I don’t think he was all hard and rigid. Is it just his arms that are hard? Maybe it really is armor, then.*

At the very least, the ustrel must be wearing armor on his left arm. The ustrel’s offensive power was just as scary as the keeper of Deadhead Watching Keep, Zoran Zesh’s, had been. However, Zoran Zesh had also protected himself by wearing tough armor and a helmet. The ustrel had nowhere near that much defensive power.

“Suuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu...”

There it was. That sound. The ustrel’s arms stretched. Kuzaku got scared and tried to back away.

“Charge in!” Haruhiro yelled at him while rushing in himself. What had Kuzaku done? He didn’t know. He clung to the ustrel, stabbing his dagger into the ustrel’s back. “There!”

The blade went through. But it was shallow, and—

Suddenly the ustrel jumped. It was a vertical jump. He lifted into the air, then landed. The shock of the landing was incredible. Haruhiro couldn't hold on.

"Wha...!" Haruhiro shouted.

He was thrown off. He fell. Haruhiro braced himself for the landing.

Oh, crap, Haruhiro realized. *It's the ustrel.*

The ustrel didn't use the naginata. He stomped on Haruhiro. On his belly, his chest—that area in general.

Haruhiro coughed and sputtered in pain.

"Heyyyyyyyyyy, youuuuuuuuuu...!" a voice bellowed.

Ranta. It was Ranta wreathed in his Dread Aura. He flew in, tackling the ustrel and jamming his longsword into him. The ustrel immediately knocked Ranta away, but there was a tear in the ustrel's blackish clothing on his side.

Haruhiro desperately tried to crawl away. From his mouth, his eyes, and his nose, he was dripping vomit, tears, snot, and who-only-knew-what other kind of fluids, but he crawled away.

"Haru?!" It was Merry's voice.

Haruhiro yelled out, "Ahm fahn!" but he was anything but, and thought that, no, he didn't look fine at all. Well, it showed he still had the composure to be able to think that, at least. Wiping his face off with one arm, he stood up.

Kuzaku was standing in front of the ustrel, while Ranta was on the ustrel's right hand side. Neither of them were managing to get in close. But somehow, they were managing to either avoid the ustrel's naginata and left arm, or to Block them. Were they getting used to it? In long arms mode, the ustrel had long reach, and every one of his

attacks was heavy, but he couldn't maneuver quickly. That seemed like it was probably part of the reason.

"If this is how it's gonna be...!" Yume readied her bow and let loose an arrow.

It looked like it was going to hit. It did. The left shoulder. Then she followed it up with another right after. This time, in the back.

The ustrel looked displeased.

"Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart!" Shihoru slammed what was now her most powerful Falz Magic spell, Thunderstorm, into him. There was an earsplitting rumble, or rather an explosion. It was usually an area of effect spell, but the ustrel was big enough that multiple bolts of lightning struck it. Even the mighty ustrel didn't get off with just a few convulsions after that. He spasmed wildly, before becoming still. He didn't move. He had stopped moving.

"Now?!" Haruhiro shouted and charged.

Is this okay? he asked himself as he did. *Is it a bad idea? I don't know, but it's too late to think about it now.*

Kuzaku, Ranta, Yume, and even Merry, they were all rushing towards the ustrel. They had probably all sprung into motion before Haruhiro had shouted the command. Everyone planned to settle this here. They wanted to finish this.

But that's not acting based on the situation—it's more of a wish, isn't it?

Haruhiro felt a chill.

This wasn't simply intuition. He had something to back it up. On the ustrel's face, that metallic skull, the part that was probably the mouthpiece of his helmet, slid upwards with a creak and opened.

"Wait! Hold on! Get away from it for now!" Haruhiro screamed.

Haruhiro started to fall back, and the ustrel began clicking its tongue.

Chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik.

I think that's probably him clicking his tongue, Haruhiro thought. *I've never heard anything click its tongue so ominously before.*

Deep inside the metallic skull mask, the ustrel was gritting his yellowed teeth and clicking his tongue. He started frothing at the mouth.

"—Uh?!" Ranta shouted, suddenly flying through the air.

That was fast! Huh? A flying kick—it got him?! Haruhiro thought. Then the ustrel swung around his naginata using both hands, knocking Kuzaku's shield flying.

"Bwuh?!" Kuzaku yelped.

"Aiee?!" Yume shrieked.

Yume got kicked like Ranta. For some reason, the ustrel stopped still after that. It clicked its tongue, its shoulders and back heaving up and down. Haruhiro, honestly, was bewildered. Merry just stood there, too. Shihoru was the only one who didn't.

"Ohm, rel, e—"

Shihoru tried to use her magic, but before she could finish the chant, the ustrel began to move again.

The ustrel leapt up, kicking Shihoru and sending her flying. Without even managing to utter a sound, Shihoru sailed through the air like an inanimate object. Like a soft piece of trash.

"Shi—" Haruhiro stopped, speechless.

Why can I see that faint line of light now? What's going on? Why

is my body moving on its own? What the hell? This is bullshit.

When Haruhiro started running to trace the line, the ustrel turned to face him.

It's the legs, he thought. *The legs. If we watch his legs, we'll know when he's going to start moving.*

The ustrel raised his knee high, kicked hard off the ground, and leapt. The ustrel came flying. Haruhiro could see him. The ustrel stuck his right foot out.

Haruhiro moved his body to the left, dodging the ustrel's right foot. He didn't just avoid the attack, he brought his sap down diagonally on the ustrel's right knee. Haruhiro rolled of his own will, and when he got back up, he could no longer see the line.

The ustrel turned to face him. It wasn't a smooth motion. The ustrel was clearly trying to cover his right leg. That meant he'd done some damage.

But—dammit, Haruhiro thought. *I could see the line, but this is all I did? I couldn't take it down. Though, that said, I did find a lead. The legs. It's the legs. Watch the legs. Again. Here he comes.*

The ustrel raised his left knee high, vigorously kicking off of the ground. Given he used his left leg for the jump, it seemed unlikely that the sap attack had had much effect.

The ustrel came flying. Haruhiro couldn't see the line, and it was all he could do just to dodge it, but he could dodge it. Haruhiro leapt aside to the left, avoiding the ustrel's flying kick.

This is where it gets scary! he thought. He was right. As soon as the ustrel landed, he swung his naginata with both hands. If Haruhiro got hit, that would be the end, but if he could predict it—Haruhiro slid under the naginata, getting away.

"Merry, how's Shihoru?!" he called.

There was no response.

Haruhiro felt dizzy. This had to be a joke. No way. His brain seethed.

I'll kill him. This guy is dead, absolutely dead. But the fact of the matter was, Haruhiro was closer to being killed than killing the ustrel. The ustrel came flying. Haruhiro was watching the ustrel's legs, so he knew the timing. The course, too. He could evade it. But only barely. That was the best he could manage.

The naginata swing after a flying kick wasn't so scary. There was a clear reason for that. The ustrel would kick off of the ground with his left foot, try to kick Haruhiro with his right, and then land on that same right foot. However, with his right knee injured, there was a slight delay before he could move on to his next action.

My opponent isn't a monster, Haruhiro thought. *Well, the guy's like a monster, but one that can be hurt. Swords and arrows can stab into him. He's not invincible. It's just that defeating him'll be hard. That's a problem, yes. A major problem. Ahh. Shihoru. Shihoru. Shihoru. I don't have time to be thinking about Shihoru. I've gotta focus on the ustrel.*

"Grahhhhh!" Kuzaku rose to his feet. "Dammiiiiiiiit!"

"Watch his legs, Kuzaku!" Haruhiro shouted as he dodged a flying kick. "If you watch his legs, you can tell when he'll be coming!"

"I live again!" Ranta hopped back up. "I'll see right through your attacks!"

Chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik, chik.

As soon as it turned into a three-on-one fight, the ustrel gave up on using his flying kick, and the sound of his tongue clicking echoed loudly through the area. His arms contracted.

He's disabled his long arms mode, but what does he plan to do now? Haruhiro wondered. *Whatever it is...*

"Don't get distracted!" he shouted. "So long as we don't take our eyes off his legs—"

Haruhiro gulped. *He's coming. Here he comes.*

This time, the ustrel didn't jump. The ustrel dashed. With his posture incredibly low, the point of his naginata in front of him, charging.

I'm gonna get run over, realized Haruhiro. *I won't let you run me over.*

Twisting his body, he evaded the naginata by the breadth of a hair. But he couldn't fully dodge. The ustrel's body hit him somewhere, and while he wasn't trampled, Haruhiro was sent flying.

"Urgh!" "Whoa!" "Gah!"

After him, Ranta and Kuzaku were knocked flying, too. Haruhiro struck his back and shoulders on the landing, but it was no big deal. The ustrel had raced around, tracing a warped circle as he mowed down the three of them, and now he stopped, his entire body heaving up and down—was he resting?

Haruhiro sat up, looking over towards Yume. Yume was trying to nock an arrow.

Then there was Merry. Merry was—sitting next to the collapsed Shihoru, performing a cardiac massage or something, maybe.

"There it is!" she gasped. "The heart! O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you! Sacrament!"

Sacrament? She was using the miracle of light, Sacrament?

Shihoru! Had her heart stopped? Merry had resuscitated her from

that state. Then used Sacrament. The spell that, so long as the target was still alive, would heal them instantly. She had already used it once on Ranta, so this was her second time. Her last Sacrament.

Yume shouted "Mrrow!" and loosed an arrow, which stabbed into the ustrel's chest.

The ustrel slowly turned towards Yume, making that ominous *chik, chik, chik, chik* tongue clicking noise as he did.

Ranta and Kuzaku both got to their feet, shouting to psyche themselves up. And then...

"I-It's okay! I'm fine now! S-S-Sorry!" Shihoru was up, too.

"Don't apologize!" Haruhiro felt like he might cry—or rather, he was already shedding tears. But he didn't have time to wipe them away.

Haruhiro opened his eyes wide, staring at the ustrel. *I'll watch you. I'll see through you.*

The ustrel raised his left knee.

"It's a flying kick!" Haruhiro shouted. "Yume!"

"Meow!" Yume curled into a ball like a pit rat and rolled around, making sharp turns to avoid the ustrel's flying kick. The ustrel landed, then lowered his posture. Had he recovered from the damage to his right leg?

"Next, it's a charge!" Haruhiro yelled. "Watch out!"

Even as he said it, Haruhiro wanted to shoot back at himself, *Yeah, and how are we supposed to watch out?*

The ustrel started running. His targets were—Merry and Shihoru. Not good. Shihoru had just finished healing. What if something happened to her again? But he couldn't stop the ustrel. Not Haruhiro.

“This...!” Kuzaku jumped in the way. Standing in front of Merry and Shihoru, he was ready for a head on collision with the ustrel if need be. Of course, that was risky. Incredibly risky. Too risky, but...

“This is why I’m a tank!”

He was right. As he was running, Haruhiro had silently screamed, *Go!* at him. He hadn’t needed to say it, because Kuzaku had done it anyway. He’d blocked the ustrel’s charge with his shield.

Then something terrifying happened. It crumpled. His shield did. Kuzaku pushed on, as if he didn’t care.

The ustrel kept charging, too. The tip of his naginata which had pierced the shield slid up Kuzaku’s left arm and pierced through his shoulder. Kuzaku twisted his longsword into the ustrel’s flank. Kuzaku in his helmet and the ustrel with his metallic skull butted heads.

Kuzaku didn’t come out the loser of that clash. He stood strong. Kuzaku tried to pull his longsword free. But it wouldn’t come out.

The ustrel grabbed Kuzaku’s helmet with his left hand, swinging back his naginata with his right.

Not that I’ll let him finish, thought Haruhiro.

Haruhiro hadn’t just been sitting there, gnawing on his fingers in nervous anticipation as he watched. He’d been running. And now, he was here. Right next to the ustrel.

Haruhiro said nothing. He just silently grabbed onto the ustrel, wrapping himself around the ustrel’s right arm from behind. He had put his sap away, but his dagger was in hand. With a backhand grip, he stabbed the dagger into the ustrel’s right shoulder. He stabbed and twisted, twisted and tore.

There was a harsh screeching sound. It wasn’t a scream. No, it was the gnashing of teeth. The ustrel foamed at the mouth, grinding his

teeth way too violently and flailing his right arm around. He was trying to shake Haruhiro off.

As if I'm going to let go!

Haruhiro had been thrown by a vertical jump last time, but with Kuzaku's longsword sticking out of his flank, the ustrel probably couldn't do that.

Kuzaku let out a war cry, slamming his body into the ustrel and shaking his longsword in all directions. Unable to bear it any longer, the ustrel took his hand off Kuzaku's helmet for a moment and punched him. His left fist clanged into Kuzaku's helmet repeatedly.

Kuzaku let out strange grunts—"Fugh! Gwah! Nuh!"—and it sounded like he was in a lot of pain, but he was enduring it. However, at this rate, he might not last long.

That's your cue, isn't it? Haruhiro thought. *Right, dread knight?*

"Leap out! Followed by—Hatred!"

Ranta came at the ustrel from the left, slamming his longsword down on top of the metallic skull helmet—no.

"That's what you think I'll do!" Ranta bellowed. "Instead, it's Tyrant's Drive!"

Yeah, no, there's no skill like that, Haruhiro thought. *Did you just make it up on the spot? Well, either way, it's not much of a skill.*

When Ranta's sword was already swinging downwards on the diagonal, he pulled it back in closer to his hands, then swung it again almost horizontally. It wasn't the top of the ustrel's helmet he was targeting—it was the mouth. What was more, Ranta didn't use the blade of his sword—he used the flat of the blade to whack the ustrel's gnashing teeth hard.

Grash!

That wasn't a voice, it was the longsword bouncing off of the ustrel's teeth. Anyway, his teeth were unbroken. Just how tough were those things? Still, the ustrel reeled backwards.

Perhaps thinking, *This is my chance,* Kuzaku pulled his longsword out of the ustrel's side. He must have been hoping to stab it in a few more times.

Haruhiro panicked. "You...! Are you stu—!"

The ustrel immediately jumped.

How can you jump that high? That doesn't even make sense! Haruhiro wanted to protest. That was how incredible of a jump it was. Haruhiro's body swung upwards.

Man, the impact when we land is going to bad, he thought. He tried to prepare himself for it, but it was even worse than he imagined.

It didn't feel like he'd fallen off, so much as that he was being thrown upwards. His brain shook inside his skull, and he was left disoriented. Even in that state, Haruhiro didn't let himself get shaken off. However, he might not be able to manage that any longer.

The ustrel began flailing around erratically. On top of that, he was running around all over.

It's no good. I can't do this anymore, Haruhiro thought as he was finally thrown into the air.

Will I die? he wondered for a moment. *No, no, no, no. I won't let myself die.*

It was times like this that the countless times he had experienced being thrown by Barbara-sensei came in handy. Haruhiro braced himself for the landing. As he was getting up from it, the ustrel nearly charged into him and sent him flying again, but he somehow avoided it.

Haruhiro shouted "Get away! Get away!" as he ran. He hurt all over, but for now he needed to put some distance between the ustrel and him.

Eventually, the ustrel stopped moving.

There was the sound of labored breathing. The ustrel was leaning on his naginata, his shoulders heaving with each breath.

I guess even the mighty ustrel gets tired, thought Haruhiro. *No. That's not all.*

The ustrel's blackish garment was cut and torn, revealing the brown skin and the wounds beneath it. A viscous liquid that looked like spoiled oil poured out of those wounds. Was that the ustrel's blood? When he looked down, Haruhiro saw that his dagger and his entire body were covered in that liquid.

It wasn't just exhaustion. Haruhiro and the party's attacks were actually having an effect.

Our formation is broken, Haruhiro thought. *Technically we're surrounding the ustrel, but that's only a coincidence. Merry and Shihoru are the only ones who've stuck together, where the rest of us have split up.*

So... do we run?

The moment that option crossed his mind, the ustrel raised his left knee. Haruhiro shouted, "It's a flying kick! Ranta!"

Instead of replying, Ranta used Leap Out to dodge the incoming ustrel.

The moment the ustrel lands, he'll face to the right, and raise his left knee—or not, Haruhiro thought. *Will he lower his posture and charge, then? No. He's not moving.*

The ustrel was wheezing, his breaths heavy and labored.

Could it be that he's pretty winded? Haruhiro wondered. *Should we all rush him? It's a hard call. I feel like the ustrel could show off hidden reserves of strength. We don't have Sacrament anymore, either.*

In the mere two to three seconds that Haruhiro hesitated, the ustrel steadied his breathing once more.

He was charging in. Towards Haruhiro.

Haruhiro let out an "Oh..."

This time, the naginata that was usually thrust outwards during charges was instead wound back.

Is he going for a swing? Haruhiro thought frantically. *It could be a jab with the pommel, too. What should I do? Hard to decide. I'll have to go. Go where?*

I'm going. Haruhiro was headed for the ustrel. *The naginata. It's coming.*

Right before that, or at precisely the same time, he slid. Into a sliding kick. The ground was basically bare rock, so he couldn't slide very well. Despite that, he managed to jump as far as the ustrel's feet.

Haruhiro managed to catch the ustrel's left and right shins, or rather he collided with them. As for what happened when he did, he wasn't able to find out immediately.

The next thing he knew, Haruhiro was rolling across the ground.

Both my feet, or my legs as a whole, they hurt so bad I'd think they were broken—or not? Well, they don't hurt, but more importantly, they won't move. I can't make them move. What is this? I can barely feel them. Where's the ustrel? He's there. Of course he's there. He's fallen over.

Ranta and Kuzaku were rushing over, trying to get in a shot on

him while they could. But the ustrel was trying to get up. Which would it be? Who was faster?

It was the ustrel. Using his naginata as a crutch, the ustrel stood up. Ranta and Kuzaku each got in one slash on him, but the ustrel didn't go down. Not only that, he swung his naginata around savagely. Ranta and Kuzaku were forced to back down.

Yume shouted "Take this!" and put an arrow in the ustrel's left shoulder, but it didn't even faze him. Meanwhile, Haruhiro couldn't move.

What's going on? This is—

As he started to wonder, Merry and Shihoru raced over. Without giving him the chance to object, the two of them dragged Haruhiro away.

I'm grateful and all, but I'm not an object, okay? Haruhiro thought. *Guess I can't blame them.*

"M-Merry, h-how's your magic...?" he asked, halfway to passing out.

"I can use Cure a few more times!" Merry responded immediately.

Maybe we should run away, after all, Haruhiro thought. *But how...?*

"O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you... Cure!"

When Merry treated him with magic, feeling soon returned to Haruhiro's legs. Thanks to that, the pain came back, too. It was intense enough he couldn't shrug it off, so it might have been a pretty serious wound, but Merry would treat it for him—or she should.

She's going to heal it... right? Even as Haruhiro endured the pain, Kuzaku was knocked flying by the ustrel's charge, and Ranta dodged it, getting in a shallow hit as the ustrel passed by. The ustrel stopped

some distance from them, wheezing as it took a break.

Yume cried “Meow!” and shot at the ustrel again.

Was Kuzaku okay? He got up on his own. The ustrel was definitely getting weaker.

“We can beat him.” Haruhiro nodded.

That’s right. We can do it. But we can’t get carried away. We can’t afford to be optimistic. We need to avoid accidents. Instead of trying to take him in one go, we need to steadily wear him down, harshly and mercilessly.

The ustrel began to move. Kuzaku cried out as he was knocked away, while Ranta dodged like before, getting in another blow, if only a light one. The ustrel stopped right after that, and, as he was wheezing, Yume shouted “Mrrrow!” and shot off an arrow at him.

It sadly missed, but Ranta and Yume each knew what they ought to be doing.

Yeah, that’s the way! Haruhiro mentally cheered them on.

The light vanished from the hand Merry was holding up towards Haruhiro. His treatment was finished.

Okay. I’ve gotta do this, so I will. I’m so gonna do this, Haruhiro told himself, leaping to his feet.

“We’re taking him down!” Haruhiro shouted. “Focus on evading, but strike back when you think you can! Ranta, Yume, keep it up! Kuzaku, quit getting hit so much! Watch how he moves closely! You need to figure it out already! The enemy’s getting pretty weak!”

“Gwah!” Kuzaku yelped.

Only moments after he’d finished saying something about it, Kuzaku failed to avoid the ustrel’s charge and was sent flying again.

Ranta used Leap Out to jump past the ustrel diagonally, getting a cut in on him with a satisfied shout. The ustrel kept charging forward, then came to a sudden stop.

Yume went "Mrrrow!" and fired an arrow, this one piercing the ustrel's back.

Kuzaku was trying to rise to his feet, but he was having a hard time of it.

"Merry, help Kuzaku!" Haruhiro called. "Shihoru, stay by Merry's side!"

"Okay!" Merry called.

"Right!" Shihoru added.

Haruhiro ran with all his strength, deliberately choosing to stop in front of the ustrel. He took a deep breath. The ustrel lifted his left knee up high.

A flying kick, huh? Come at me.

He came.

Compared to how things had been at first, the ustrel's speed had dropped considerably. He wasn't scary at all. Haruhiro maintained his composure, dodging the ustrel's flying kick. When he turned around, the ustrel took a swing at him with his naginata.

I can see that, too, Haruhiro thought. *It's slow. So slow. Maybe I can get in close? No, I won't push my luck.*

While Haruhiro easily dodged and swayed around the naginata, Ranta shouted "Take this!" and took a swing at the ustrel. The ustrel blocked it with his left arm, but it was a weak hit. Ranta held his ground without being knocked away.

"Sparkle!" Ranta shouted, and if his eyes had had a sparkling

function, they no doubt would have sparkled magnificently. Of course, they had no such function. “Hell Devil Execution!”

Again, there’s no such skill, Haruhiro thought.

All Ranta did was use his natural stamina to swing his longsword around erratically. That was all. There was no way that would work against the ustrel. When the ustrel had had more energy, he would have knocked Ranta’s sword away, and that would have been the end of it. But now, things were different.

The ustrel used his left arm and naginata, which he was choking up his grip on, to block Ranta’s longsword. He blocked, and he blocked. He was stuck on the defensive. Ranta was pushing the ustrel backwards. He was pushing him into a corner.

There’s no point in telling Ranta not to get cocky now, Haruhiro thought. *I mean, he’s Ranta, after all. In that case, I’ll do something before Ranta runs out of steam!*

Haruhiro quickly got behind the ustrel. When he was staring at an enemy’s back like this, it was strangely calming. The ustrel had a broad back. With a few arrows sticking out of it. Three, to be precise.

There, maybe, Haruhiro thought as he chose a target. Ustrel or not, he was still a humanoid creature, so even if Haruhiro couldn’t see the line, he more or less could tell where to hit.

If something looks like a vital point, I’ll trust that it is, Haruhiro thought. *If I’m wrong, well, I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it. Backstab. I can do it.*

Closing in smoothly, he thrust a dagger into the spot he’d chosen. It didn’t feel like a bad hit, and the ustrel’s entire body trembled for a moment, so maybe it had—no. Haruhiro jumped away from the ustrel at once.

“Ohgoagogogogoahgoahohgaohgaohgogagagagagogoggooohgogool

“Wha...?!” Ranta yelled.

The sword Ranta had used to block the ustrel’s naginata was flung off somewhere. The way the ustrel moved had suddenly changed. If it were to be described with not one word, but two, it was violent and erratic. On top of that, it had stopped gnashing its teeth and started howling.

“Uwahhhhhhhhh?!” Ranta shouted. “Haruhiro, man, what’d you do?!”

The ustrel chased after the now-barehanded Ranta while howling madly. Ranta used a mixture of Leap Out and Exhaust to run away. He kept running, occasionally taking a scratch from the ustrel’s naginata. Somehow or another, he was managing to escape with his life for the moment.

It had been the Backstab. No doubt about it. This had been the effect of that Backstab. Someone had once said that a wounded animal was the most dangerous, And the ustrel was backed into a corner. He was working up his last reserves of strength, trying to kill his enemies. In other words, Haruhiro and the party. If he couldn’t do that, the ustrel was finished.

This was where the battle would be decided.

“He’s just delaying the inevitable!” Haruhiro shouted. “We’ll outlast him! Hang in there, and grind him down!”

“Mrrrow!” Yume fired off an arrow into the ustrel’s butt.

Ranta screamed. He was probably trying to get over to his longsword, but he just couldn’t make it there. “H-H-H-Help me, you moron!”

“Oh, yeah, I’ve *got* this!” Kuzaku was back on his feet after Merry used Cure on him.

Well, that’s good and all, but he’s sounding weirdly high-strung

there, Haruhiro thought. *Is he okay?*

Okay or not, Kuzaku plowed into the ustrel's side. When the ustrel swung his naginata at him, Kuzaku swung his longsword at it with two hands, stopping it with a loud clang, then pushing it back.

Kuzaku bellowed, "Aw, yeahhhhhh!"

"Ogoagoahhhh!" the ustrel howled, slamming his naginata into Kuzaku. He hit him with it again and again.

Kuzaku was unyielding, he howled back, "Gahhh! Gwahhh! Zahhh!" as he knocked away the naginata with his longsword. For now, he was managing to deflect it, but if he missed even once, it would be over.

Honestly, I'm too scared to watch, Haruhiro thought. *But if I call out to him carelessly, I could do more harm than good. Right now, Kuzaku's concentration is insane. I don't want to break that.*

Ranta picked up his own longsword. "We meet again, my Excalibur!"

What're you calling Excalibur? Haruhiro thought as he moved around to get behind the ustrel.

Yume was nocking an arrow, but with Kuzaku and the ustrel locked in fierce combat, she couldn't line up a shot.

Haruhiro and Merry's eyes met. Merry immediately held up two fingers. Two Cure spells left, that meant.

Shihoru took a step forward.

"Jess, yeen, sark, fram, dart!" she chanted, drawing elemental sigils with her staff.

Lightning. The thunder rumbled, and a bolt of electricity pierced the ustrel. His body convulsing, he looked like he might fall. He managed

to stay on his feet, but Kuzaku used that opening to launch a counterattack.

"Gah! Gah! Gahhh!"

His swings were a mess, and he was clearly getting in too deep. Still, it worked out well. As Kuzaku's sword pushed in and the ustrel's naginata pushed back, it was as if their hilts had locked together. They weren't actually locked, because a naginata doesn't have a hilt guard, but it looked like they had. The hilt of Kuzaku's longsword and the fist the ustrel was gripping his naginata with were jostling against one another. Regardless, they were in a stalemate.

Now's our chance! was one thing Haruhiro didn't have to tell anyone.

"Meow!" Yume fired an arrow, hitting the ustrel in the right shoulder.

"Leap Out, followed byyyyy—Satan's Blooooow!" It was an impressive sounding name and all, but all Ranta did was jump at the ustrel and slash his left shoulder.

Haruhiro jumped onto the ustrel's back. The metallic skull helmet covered the neck, too, but Haruhiro knew the ustrel had no armor covering his chest, his back, his torso, or his shoulders. Haruhiro jammed his dagger in right underneath the rim of that helmet. He stabbed him eagerly, then immediately backed off.

"Gugohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" the ustrel screamed.

"—Wha?!" Kuzaku was pushed back and knocked on his rear.

Oh, crap, that's—not that bad...?

The ustrel didn't try to hit Kuzaku while he was down. He stumbled, his huge form swaying, unsteady on his feet, as he planted his naginata's pommel on the ground.

Have we done it? Haruhiro thought. *No, it looks like that's not quite it.*

"Ogoh!" The ustrel lifted up his naginata, spinning his body around.

"Whoa, get back!" Haruhiro leapt backwards.

Kuzaku screamed, rolling and scrambling to get away. Ranta pulled back, too. Yume, Merry, and Shihoru were at a distance to begin with, so they were fine.

The ustrel spun around seven times, then slumped against his naginata, exhausted. They watched for some time, but he showed no signs of moving.

He's probably resting, Haruhiro thought. *That's bad.*

"Attack!" he shouted.

As everyone ran in to attack, the ustrel started whirling around again.

Once they hurriedly ran away, the ustrel ran out of strength after spinning around seven times, and leaned on his naginata.

I'm not letting you rest any more, Haruhiro thought fiercely. He shouted, "Let's go!"

Ranta and Kuzaku each got in a hit or two, Yume got in one arrow, and Haruhiro himself got in a good hard whack with his sap. At that point, the ustrel started whirling around again, so they fell back. This time, it didn't make it to seven spins, only six. It looked like this was pretty hard on the ustrel. At this point, Haruhiro didn't even have to give the signal anymore.

Haruhiro and the others would attack, each of them getting in one or two hits, and then the ustrel would do his big spin. They would fall back, counting the number of rotations. One, two, three, four, five, six times around. *What a hard worker*. They didn't bother thinking

those sorts of unnecessary things before charging.

They cut him, whacked him, shot him. The ustrel spun around, forcing Haruhiro and the others to temporarily withdraw.

Three, four, five, and he looked ready to spin out of control on the sixth.

Making a point of not thinking *We can do this,* or, *Just a little longer,* they would close in on him, almost mechanical in their attacks. They attacked and attacked.

The ustrel howled, so they all leapt back and braced themselves, but no big spin came.

Haruhiro and Ranta traded glances.

Ranta wanted to go. Haruhiro was quick to shake his head. He wasn't about to get reckless after coming this far. He tempered caution with more caution. No matter what, he wasn't going to let anyone die here. That was his top priority. It was okay to let some opportunities slip by. He would just have to take advantage of the next one.

Haruhiro looked at the ustrel. He felt the urge to blink, but he resisted it. The ustrel was putting more of his weight on the naginata than his own legs.

The ustrel's mouth opened wide, with a wheezing sound and a thick blackish fluid leaking out. He seemed so small, somehow. The ustrel had been so big, yet now he looked small.

First, his knees gave out. The ustrel sandwiched his naginata between his legs, getting into a sitting position, and then the metallic skull mask faced up at them. An orange tongue lolled out, and a moaning sound escaped, then stopped. After that, the ustrel moved no more.

Haruhiro used Sneaking to approach the ustrel from behind. When

he got to about a meter and a half away, the metallic skull helmet suddenly turned towards Haruhiro, and he thought his heart might stop.

Oh, crap, he thought. *That was scary. Is he coming? Is he? It's fine. Even if he comes at me, I can get away. I'm ready for it. No problem. I can cope. Besides, I don't even see any sign the ustrel's breathing.*

Haruhiro bit his lip. He took a short, deep breath. "Finish him!"

The moment he shouted it, Ranta, Kuzaku, and Yume rushed towards the ustrel. After that, it was just longswords, machetes, and more cutting up, smashing, and beating down the ustrel.

Haruhiro participated, too. Merry and Shihoru did not.

Even as they swung their weapons with all their might, Haruhiro—no, everyone, including Haruhiro—was perfectly calm. Their objective was clear. To terminate the ustrel. To utterly eradicate the threat he posed.

Even when the ustrel slumped to the ground, they kept at it for a while. It certainly didn't feel good. But it was necessary. Stopping to take his pulse, to make sure he was dead— they didn't have time to take it easy like that. They had to thoroughly kill him.

Once the ustrel was utterly destroyed, everyone stopped.

After all of that, I'm exhausted. I don't feel like talking, Haruhiro thought. *If I say so much as a word, it feels like my soul might escape with it. I'd die if my soul escaped like that.*

"...We did it." Ranta exhaled deeply, leaning back and waving his arms around. "We did it! We did it, damn it! We killed that ustrel good! How do you like that, you piece of crap?!"

"That sure was nerve-rackin'..." Yume slumped to the ground. She was drenched with sweat, her hair clinging to her face. She looked

haggard. It was so bad, you had to wonder how many pounds she'd lost from just this one fight alone. "No more of this..."

"I..." Kuzaku was sitting on his haunches, his head hung. "I... I thought... I was gonna... die..."

"Haru." Merry signaled him with her eyes. She used a gesture to tell him that she and Shihoru would watch the area.

Haruhiro nodded, meaning, *That'll help. Seriously, it will.*

That was crazy, he thought. *We were walking on thin ice there. Seriously thin ice. Does it feel like a victory? Not in the least. Is this a win? It's not a loss. That much I can say for sure. No, the ustrel's dead over there, so it must be a win. And not by a wide margin, either. If we had to do this ten times, I can't say we'd win every one, but we'd probably win six of them. There were a number of crises, but we managed to work through them somehow, and we'll do even better next time. If we assume that, this time, we won a battle we had a sixty percent chance of winning, next time, we should be able to bring our odds up to seventy percent. After that, it'll be eighty. Then ninety. As we repeat the process, we can get to the point where we'll more or less never lose.*

Experience. This was what it meant to build experience. And the experience gained from fighting the ustrel could be put to use in their battles with other enemies.

In fact, if they hadn't been through the fight to the death at Deadhead Watching Keep, they would have panicked just from encountering the ustrel, which could easily have gotten them wiped out. No, not could, it definitely would have.

Getting stronger wasn't just learning skills, acquiring new equipment, building stamina, and strengthening their muscles—it was more than that.

They had to experience things. They had to use their own heads and bodies to learn the terror, the harshness, the pains and difficulties.

Then they had to overcome them.

True, Haruhiro and his comrades were not strong. No matter how they trained, Haruhiro, for instance, could never become like Renji. However, with each experience like this, they might not get closer to Team Renji, but Haruhiro and the party could grow in their own way. If they had different experiences from Renji and his group, they would gain different knowledge, different specialties, and expand their abilities differently. Even if they were inferior ninety-nine percent of the time, just that once, they wouldn't lose. It was fully possible that they could turn out like that.

Potential.

It's there.

We still have potential.

Moguzo. Even now that we've lost you, there are still things we can do. Lots of them, in fact. If anything, there may be things we'll only have to do because we've lost you.

If you could have always stayed with us, that would have been for the best. But just because we've lost you, that doesn't mean it's all over. I feel bad for you, and it makes me feel very sad, very lonely to say this, but we have to move on. We can keep moving forward.

Haruhiro put a hand on Yume's shoulder. "Good work. A whole lot of your arrows hit their mark today. After all the times you've talked about how bad you are at it, you were amazing."

"...Yeah." Yume looked up at Haruhiro, holding his hand tight. It wasn't just sweat. She had tears in her eyes, too. "Yume, she couldn't just keep sayin' she was no good at it. Yume needs to do the things Yume can do, y'know. It's not about needin' to try hard—Yume, she wants to try hard."

"Yume, I know you're trying hard," said Haruhiro.

“Well, yeah, but Yume can do much, much more.”

“I’d say it’s okay for you to take it a little bit at a time, don’t you think?” said Haruhiro. “You don’t have to do everything at once. We’ve got a long time to work on it.”

“Maybe you’re right.” Yume furrowed her brow and bit her lip.

If Haruhiro and the party continued on like this, they would likely make it through to tomorrow somehow, but that wasn’t true for everyone.

The world was neither equal nor fair. Someone had once said the only thing that was equal for all was time. But that wasn’t true. While time may flow equally for all, ours can easily be snatched away from us. This was something Haruhiro and the others had no need to remind themselves of, because they knew it well.

Haruhiro gripped Yume’s shoulder firmly, then let go. He had nothing to say to Ranta. He slapped him on the back and Ranta gave him a “Heh.”

“Shihoru.” When Haruhiro called out to her, Shihoru shrunk her neck into her body and looked at him apologetically. *No, I haven’t even said anything yet.* “Your timing with those spells was good. It helped us out a lot.”

“There’s a lot of room for improvement…” Shihoru said. “Actually, I still don’t have enough firepower…”

While she may have looked timid, Shihoru had the bravery to face her own weaknesses. That meant that even if she was weak, she could become stronger. In Shihoru’s case, it would probably be better to urge her to improve than to console her.

“Yeah,” Haruhiro said. “The way things stand, your magic can’t be the decisive blow against more powerful enemies. I think you could pursue that as a goal.”

"Yes," she said meekly.

"There's no need to be so meek..."

"S-Sorry..."

Shihoru bowed her head, and Merry gave her a pat on the back.

It's kind of nice, seeing them like that, Haruhiro thought. *I'm not jealous or anything. When I see girls who are close to each other, it's strangely calming. When it's a guy and a girl, that's more awkward, though.*

Merry was looking at him, so Haruhiro gave her a smile. Merry smiled back just a little.

This isn't bad, either. I feel like Merry and I can really communicate. Only as comrades in the same party, but still. When it comes to anything more than that, or other than that—I'm not so sure. I don't feel like we could. Not that we have to. We're comrades in the same party, after all.

Haruhiro turned to Kuzaku and offered him his hand. "You'll have to buy a new shield, huh."

"...Guess so." Kuzaku extended his hand, Haruhiro took it by the wrist and pulled him to his feet.

Still, is this guy big, or what? Haruhiro thought. *When you're tall and thin, it's a real asset. Even if your face is pretty normal, you still look relatively cool.*

"Unlike before, you actually did your job as tank," Haruhiro said. "I'm gonna demand more and more of you from here on, so expect that."

"I'll do it," said Kuzaku. "Whatever I have to. So I don't die—actually, so I don't let anyone else die, either."

"I'm counting on you." Haruhiro poked Kuzaku in the ribs.

Maybe I ought to make a rule against romance within the party, he thought for a moment. *If people within the group hook up or have a break up, that could cause a lot of trouble, so it might be a good idea.*

With a glance to the ustrel's remains, he looked up into the narrow slit of sky visible from inside the canyon-like Wonder Hole.

Here, in this Wonder Hole, we're going to get stronger, Haruhiro resolved. *We'll build up a ton of experience, gain more and more strength, and—this one would get me laughed at, so I won't ever say it out loud—but someday, we'll get to the point we can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Soma.*

I swear we will.

Afterword

When I opened my eyes, I was in the middle of a battle. It seemed that I had fallen asleep at some point. The controller was still in my hands. When I restarted the battle, I noticed one of my party members was dead.

Why are you dead? I don't remember, I thought. *I'll have to bring you back to life. Well, whatever.*

I was just slaughtering weak monsters to level up, so I could handle losing one person.

Would you usually die, though? Fighting enemies of this level? I'm sure, in my hazy semi-conscious state, I must have neglected to heal while continuing my mass murder. When I looked, my surviving party members were pretty low on health, too.

Ahh. There goes another one. Well, whatever. Battle's finished.

Two people were dead, and one of them was the one who could cast the revival spell. I could also have used an item to revive them, but that would be a waste, so I used magic to warp back to town. I revived them, healed them, and now what? I had money saved up, but I'd more or less bought everything I wanted already. When I thought about it, there was no need to be such a cheapskate about using the items.

Guess I'll go level some more, I thought. *Nah, I think I've done enough. Time to advance the story, I guess. Wait, where do I go and what do I do next, anyway? What was I supposed to be doing?*

I've had similar experiences—or actually, practically the same experience—time and again, cutting into my sleeping hours to do it. Did I waste my time? I don't think so. I mean, if not for the time I

spent doing that, I wouldn't be writing this book, *Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash*, right now.

Out of habit, or to escape, or in search of pleasant, mind-numbing work, I was idly spending my time leveling up. Looking back to a time long before then, I had seen a new world inside video games.

With the advance of technology, open-world games and 3D action RPGs like *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* are now made all the time, inviting me back into that world I feel such nostalgia for, but at the moment, my greatest hope is reserved for VR headsets. I am certain that a VR headset will immerse me in newer and more different worlds. I am hoping the next-gen gaming experience will be able to win against the act of writing novels, something which plays out inside my head and stimulates all five of my senses. But, I dunno. Novel writing is difficult and, at times, painful, but it really is fun.

I've run out of pages.

To my editor, K, to Eiri Shirai-san, to the designers of KOMEWORKS among others, to everyone involved in production and sales of this book, and finally to all of you people now holding this book, I offer my heartfelt appreciation and all of my love. Now, I lay down my pen for today.

I hope we will meet again.

Oh, that's right, please support my other series, *What's Wrong with a Hero Being Jobless?*, too.

Ao Jyumonji